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A PIONEER OF DEMOCRACY IN ENGLAND

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A PIONEER OF DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL REFORM IN ENGLAND DURING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

BY

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"... I am a *sans-culottes*—one of those who think the happiness of millions of more consequence than the aggrandisement of any party junto; or, in other words, an advocate for the rights and happiness of those who are languishing in want and nakedness. ..."—(From Thelwall's *Political Lectures.*)

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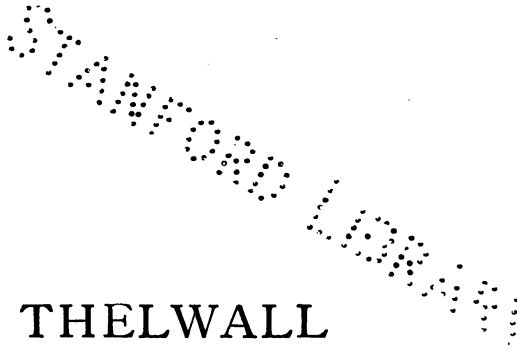

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FOREWORD

WITHIN the period extending from the American War to the present day, great changes have taken place in English political theory and practice. For a statesman of 1775, were he even a Whig, the notion of government was inseparable from oligarchic rule, was limited to matters strictly political, and dominated by considerations of expediency. A statesman of 1905, even if he is a Tory, accepts, or at any rate recognises, government by the people, and asserts the need not only of political but of economic and moral melioration; if he is a Liberal, along with the traditional empiricism of England, he sets down a rational ideal as a potent factor in the work of civilisation. Democracy, social reform, political idealism—such are the chief features which distinguish the politics of our time from those of the end of the eighteenth century.

In what manner and to what extent the example and the spirit of the French Revolution may have quickened the evolution of English history and awakened new thoughts and feelings in the minds both of governors and governed is, in our opinion,

a question worth raising, when it is considered that democratic institutions, social legislation, and devotion to an ideal were precisely the lessons taught to Europe by France, in the course of her determined and heroic attempt to overthrow the absolutism of her kings.

If we direct our attention to the general history of the nineteenth century, there can be no question that the French Revolution has had important reflex consequences abroad, inasmuch as it was not a mere crisis in the affairs of France, but it arose from universal causes at work in the most highly civilised countries. It brought to a focus and heated to a flash the forces which, in these countries, had been slowly transforming literature, science, philosophy and politics, and gradually preparing a change in the balance of social classes, during the second half of the eighteenth century. Its influence was the more likely to extend to England, as from England had originally come the intellectual, emotional, and political impetus which, next to the pressure of circumstances, had determined the upheaval of the French nation.[1] English poets and novelists had headed the revival of feeling in literature; English philosophers had first made use of the powers of reason in matters of civil polity; the English Commons had first realised the institutions of liberty. Moreover, since the American War, a democratic

[1] We have especially in mind the influence of Locke upon the Encyclopædists, of Shaftesbury and Richardson upon J. J. Rousseau, of the English Constitution upon Montesquieu and some prominent members of the Constituent Assembly.

movement had been making itself felt among British non-electors and dissenters, which, had no extraneous causes interfered, would have wrought peacefully in England the great change for which so much blood was to be spilt in France.

When it comes to noticing the immediate influence of the French Revolution upon England in the years following 1789, the facts at first sight seem to contradict all probabilities and expectations. Owing partly to the excesses and the ill-advised aggressiveness of the French, partly to a quickening of the traditional hatred between the two countries, the direct influence of the French Revolution in England was an all but universal rise of anti-revolutionary feeling, a panic of the property-owning and governing classes, the temporary suspension of constitutional securities, and a five-and-twenty years' interruption in the onward march of political progress.

Yet, in opposition to this anti-revolutionary feeling of the majority, there grew up, under the influence of French ideas, a small party of the minority—the Reform Party—contending for the undelayed application of some of the principles included in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. This party had its political theorists, its writers, its orators, its preachers, its men of action. It formed itself into societies, circulated hand-bills, published pamphlets, drew up petitions, held meetings, and summoned a national congress of all its organisations. It raised its voice in very untimely season indeed, and committed not a few indiscretions of utterance, though never infringing the laws of the land or incurring the guilt

of any revolutionary acts. It met with the reprobation of the educated classes, with hatred and assault on the part of the mob, and with relentless persecution from the Government, ranging from gagging bills to trials for high treason. Whether the Reformers deserved the abuse which they suffered and the harsh treatment which was meted out to them, is a point, to our thinking, which can be decided upon only after a closer survey of their case than has yet been attempted. For so great has been the animosity against them ever since the days of the French and English Terror, that, in spite of the progress of political ideas and institutions in England, they have not yet received their due at the hands of the historian. A thorough and accurate inquiry into their tenets, doings and designs has still to be made.[1]

Not until this history has been written will it be possible to ascertain to what extent the spirit of the French Revolution may have penetrated England, and, exerting its influence beyond the five-and-twenty years' eclipse of liberalism, may have hastened the advent of democracy, imparted a wish for social reform, and inspired the leaders of the people with an ideal transcending prejudice and precedent. Our purpose in the present book is to contribute our quota of evidence towards a future history of the Reform Party in England from 1789 to 1797, and by this

[1] "The Story of the English Jacobins," by Ed. Smith, and "The Dawn of Radicalism," by J. B. Daly (of Trinity College, Dublin), are interesting sketches of the chief figures and leading events of the Reform movement originated in England by the French Revolution, but they make no claim to any scholarly character.

means to collect material for a comparative study of the growth of social democracy in England and in France.

We wish to present to our readers John Thelwall, a writer of prose and verse, a "philosopher" and a popular speaker, who deeply imbibed the principles of the French Revolution, and by work of pen or word of mouth communicated his knowledge and his enthusiasm to a large number of his countrymen. History has ignored him, or has lost the memory of his name. Yet he played a prominent part in the first democratic agitation in England, gained great ascendancy over the more educated elements of the labouring class, and, as we think, cannot but have been powerfully instrumental in awakening the lower orders to the consciousness of their opportunities.

He seems to us chiefly interesting as a representative of obscure mental tendencies in the England of the second half of the eighteenth century, suddenly brought from potentiality into act, magnified and intensified, by the shock of the French Revolution. As a man of letters transformed by this great emotional and intellectual impact into a philanthropist, a leader of the people and a social reformer, he may help us to understand how the rationalism and the romanticism which were insensibly growing in his days could be brought to bear decisively on the actual and burning problem of democracy. As a Jacobin whose doctrine of political equality soon ripened into a claim for a juster distribution of wealth, he may throw a light upon the question of

the origin of social aspirations and their connection with the French Revolution. He was one of the few unsparing political teachers who, at a time when untoward circumstances prevented immediate achievement, proclaimed a widened political ideal and a new social creed, and cleared the way for the future conquests of labour and democracy.

We have based the plan of our book upon a provisional judgment which the present study, and our other investigations in the same field,[1] have enabled us to form as to the immediate influence of the French Revolution upon such English minds as were prepared to receive it. This influence, as we have been led to believe, acted like a vast and powerful current of idealism, producing three main effects. In the first place, it greatly strengthened the forces of sentiment and of imagination that had been for a few decades in the process of formation in England, and irresistibly directed them towards love of man and desire for justice on earth; as such, it especially manifested itself in literature. In the second place, it encouraged a vanguard of conscious non-electors to urge the extension of the franchise, towards which English politics naturally tended, but which in the light of the Rights of Man became a precise and present claim. In the third place, it roused in a few speculative minds and feeling hearts the serious wish—beyond the acquisition of political rights—to secure to all men by social legislation a

[1] We have carried on similar investigations, from a different point of view, in our "French Revolution and English Poets."

more equal share in the moral blessings and the material advantages of civilisation. Each of these issues, in so far as they affected Thelwall, will form the matter of one of the three chapters of our volume. We shall successively study in Thelwall: (1) the "man of feeling" and the "philosopher"; (2) the "patriot," in the revolutionary sense of the word, that is, the supporter of popular claims; (3) the "reformer," or exponent of a doctrine which called up an ideal vision of future justice and happiness, and sketched out the work of generations to come.

We do not mean to write a biography. Keeping in sight the historical problems stated above, we intend to draw a literary and political portrait of John Thelwall, from which will be intentionally excluded such events of the man's life as have no significance for our general purpose, and which will be concluded with the violent untimely close of his political career in 1797.

We have taken our materials from the extant printed works of Thelwall, of which a bibliography will be found at the end of this volume. We have had, moreover, the good fortune of procuring at the sale of the late James Dykes Campbell's library, at Messrs. Sotheby & Co's., in June, 1904, six MSS. volumes of letters, notes and outlines of intended books and lectures collected by Thelwall himself, from which we have derived valuable information concerning important points of his doctrine and momentous episodes of his public life. At the same sale we also came into possession of a printed narrative

of Thelwall's trial for high treason,[1] extremely scarce, containing a vivid and detailed account of Thelwall's case, which, strangely enough, is not recorded either in Cobbet's or in Howell's "State Trials."

[1] By a Student in the Temple, London, 1794 (not to be found in the British Museum).

CHAPTER I

THE "MAN OF FEELING" AND THE "PHILOSOPHER"

By his condition and his education, Thelwall was far removed from the influences which, in the time of his youth, predominated at court, in fashionable circles, and in literary coteries, and which made superficiality and artificiality, witty trifling and fluent generalising, elegant selfishness and aristocratic aloofness, the salient features of eighteenth century high life. On the other hand, by his quick imagination, his susceptibility to emotion, his earnestness, his passion, he was particularly apt to be impressed by the rising influx of new intellectual and sentimental forces that waxed stronger towards the end of the century, and prepared a transformation of literature, of thought, and of political and social conditions. We shall not wonder, then, to see him joining early the ranks of the independent school of writers who claimed for themselves the epithet of "romantic," and siding with the independent party of thinkers who felt keen sympathy for want and misery, were prompt to detect oppression, and yearned after more justice and more liberty.

We will first study in him the "man of feeling" and the "philosopher," and show how well prepared

he was, having breathed in a native atmosphere of renovation, to sympathise with the French Revolution, to assimilate its doctrines, and to share in its enthusiasm.

The youngest son of a London silk-mercer, John Thelwall lost his father when nine years of age, and was brought up in a rather haphazard way by his mother, whose whole time was taken up with carrying on her husband's business. After struggling a few years, she failed, and the obligation fell upon the youth of providing for himself and his mother. Prior to the downfall of the business, however, Thelwall had received a sound rudimentary education at a school in Highgate, and formed a real taste for learning under the guidance of an inspiring master.[1] The boy's knowledge was large enough to stir within him a desire for more, and his intellectual training sufficient to enable him to perfect his education single-handed. He addressed himself to the task, while working for his daily bread, upheld throughout by unflinching energy and a passion for intellectual pursuits. He was indeed a self-made man. The hardships he experienced caused him, after he had risen to a height of distinction which might have won him the favours of the privileged few, to remain the devoted friend of the unprivileged and disinherited many.

He was born with an unusual faculty of sensibility which, not being disciplined in his youth, expanded unchecked, and destined him to become a true "man

[1] See the "Apostrophe to Harvey" in Thelwall's *Effusions of Social and Relative Affection*, 1802.

of feeling," according to the type that flourished at the end of the eighteenth century. His widowed mother, wishing to prepare him for business, put him behind the counter at thirteen years of age. But instead of sitting down to silk-sorting and book-keeping, the boy read, studied, or scribbled pages of poetry. An attempt to apprentice him to a tailor had no better result; he would stay out hours, when sent on an errand, devouring books as he went along the streets, till his master could no longer bear with his disobedience and remissness.

Thelwall was totally unfit for either the shop or the needle. It was then that a gentleman of "the Chancery bar," his only sister's husband, tried to direct him towards the law. The youth allowed himself to be articled to an attorney, and made a sincere effort to master the subtleties of cases, reports and precedents, in which his curious and quick intellect found much to ponder over. But it was not long until his feelings and conscience were painfully hurt by proceedings to which the less sensitive and less precise men of the profession had grown callous. One day he was commanded to go to Norwood and serve a writ upon an inhabitant of the place. For a long time he rambled about the cottage, loath to enter, reflecting upon the consequences which might attend the harsh blow which he was to deal at the man and his family. The sense of duty at last overcame his hesitation. He knocked and was shown in by the wife, who happened to be alone in the house. Seeing that she mistook him for a friend of her husband's, he felt unable to undeceive her.

After waiting some time, he went off without plucking up courage enough to disclose the real object of his visit.[1] On another occasion, he refused to certify to a document which he had not read. "Young man," exclaimed his employer bluntly, "you will never make progress in life if your fastidiousness is so great that you cannot conform to practices that have not excited the scruples of some of the first men at the Bar!"[2] Thelwall took the hint, and had his indentures cancelled. After a few other unsuccessful trials, among which were the professions of painting and acting, it became a pressing need for the young man, aged twenty-two, to undertake some remunerative work, as much for his own living as for the maintenance of his mother and an invalid elder brother.

The vast mass of information which he had collected at odd moments, in the intervals of uncongenial business and professional drudgery, the literary talent which he had obstinately cultivated in spite of all remonstrances and impediments, now stood him in good stead, and saved those who had become dependent upon his exertions. From among his poetical productions, desultorily composed on the counter, in the attorney's office, or during wakeful hours of the night, he selected the matter of two volumes of "Poems on Various Subjects," which were published by subscription in 1787. This juvenile work, acknowledged by *The Critical Review* to contain "indications of an

[1] "The Life of John Thelwall," by (the second) Mrs. Thelwall, (pp. 24-26), L. 1837.

[2] "Life," p. 26.

original and bold imagination,"[1] introduced him to some valuable friends who helped him to start on the literary career.

At the end of the eighteenth century, as we have already hinted, two roads lay open to a young man of letters: the classic high-road, trodden of late by Pope and Johnson, and now crowded with dutiful followers of these famous worthies, which led shortly and smoothly to fame; and the romantic by-path, along which a handful of independents were obscurely making way, greeted by few, unheeded by most. The choice of one or the other was not a mere matter of intellectual preference or emotional propensity, but depended upon deeper causes which were insensibly altering the minds of men, and remotely preparing great changes in government, in society, and in the very conception of life. There were signs of a new consciousness, in opposition alike to the strictness of literary canons and to the rigidity of social distinctions, at enmity both with stilted verse or prose and with aristocratic pride, in rebellion at the same time against decorum, artificiality, impassiveness in literature, and cold formality, prejudice and privilege in society. A spirit of revolt was abroad which no longer endured naturalness, sensibility and imaginative daring to be excluded from letters and from good manners; common life to be shut out of the pale of art, and the common man out of the pale of human sympathy; ignoble worth to be refused due estimation, and unpropertied merit to be denied a share in government. The mass of the people, it is true, had not been reached by this

[1] Volume lxiv., October, 1787.

growing moral and social unrest, but it was spreading among intelligent shopkeepers and skilled craftsmen, at whose head naturally stood the *élite* of dissent and the independent men of letters who composed what might be called the intellectual "proletariat."

Among these writers, John Thelwall was to take rank. He was to be one of the small phalanx of writers and orators, poets and divines, novelists and philosophers, who were soon to muster at the call of the French Revolution, instinct with love of man, and eager to right the wrongs of mankind. He was to stand side by side with Horne Tooke, the champion of reform in the Law Courts and in Parliament; with Thomas Paine, the apostle of reason in the New and in the Old world; with W. Godwin, the theorist of political justice; with Mary Wollstonecraft, the defender of the Rights of Woman; with Holcroft, the Jacobin novelist and dramatist; with Price, Priestley, and Wakefield, propagandists of Unitarianism, peace and fraternity; with Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, poets, enthusiasts and staunch believers in a coming renovation which was to bring the unsightly world of man into harmony with the beauteous world of Nature. Among these precursors, who, though precluded from any immediate results, or destined partly to recant their faith in later years, were the pioneers of moral and social reform in England, Thelwall was to play a conspicuous part, till the acceleration of the events in France and the heightening of his reforming fervour was to make him into a man of action, and to bring upon him the ordeal which would shatter his hopes and break short his public career.

The party of philosophical Reformers, while endeavouring to infuse into Government and society the spirit of independence, individualism, and humanity, owed more than at first sight appears, and more than they were aware, to the mode of thinking of the classics whose authority they had purposely shaken off. As Taine has shown in a masterly chapter of his "Origines de la France Contemporaine,"[1] the tendency to abstraction and generalisation which was the prominent feature of the classic mind remained one of the fundamental elements of revolutionary thought. It does not behove us here to consider whether this indebtedness of the revolutionists to the classics was for the better or for the worse, whether it must be termed a blighting inheritance from the past or an anticipated truth of the future.[2] The whole question of the usefulness and efficacy of a political and social ideal is implied in the interpretation of this fact, and can only be solved when social democracy, now in the process of formation, has reached a more advanced

[1] Taine, "Origines de la France Contemporaine," vol. i. See also Mr. John Morley's comment on Taine's views in his "Critical Miscellanies," Second Series, First Article.

[2] We refer the reader to M. Jaurès' refutation of Taine's position in his "Histoire Socialiste." What Taine inveighs against as a fatal tendency to set logical abstraction above concrete reality, M. Jaurès values as a first attempt, awkward, it may be, but promising to infer scientific laws from disconnected facts, and to organise the scrap wisdom of experience into a system of conduct. According to the latter historian's construction, classicism can no longer be looked upon (in Taine's words) as a distemper of the human mind, but appears as a fruitful stage of intellectual progress.

stage. Leaving aside this broad and momentous problem, we will retain the striking fact, first pointed out by Taine—a fact which applies not only to the French Revolutionists but to their English disciples—that the movement of revolt, while discarding the classic temper and restraint, held fast to the classic method of reasoning. Classic reasoning, it is true, no longer served to justify ancient prejudices or solemn commonplaces; it was used to batter down old notions, and set up in their stead the principles of individualism in literature and in politics. But it may be said that, in many respects, it provided the adherents of the early revolutionary and romantic movement with the very mould of their thought. These writers evinced as great a taste for ratiocination as for picturesqueness or pathos; and as often indulged in the abstract, deductive, didactic vein of the classics as in the descriptive, flighty, impassioned mood of imaginative and lyric poetry.

Thelwall, like so many of his contemporaries, was to be both a poet of sentiment and a reasoner in verse. He was to give vent to all the passions, sympathies, and longings which decorum and authority had so long repressed, and at the same time to turn every descriptive or pathetic effusion into a means of spreading his philosophy of man and of society.

It was the outbreak of the French Revolution that gave a decidedly speculative bent to his mind. The movement of French thought, prior to the Revolution, either the ethical idealism of J. J. Rousseau or the utilitarian mechanicalism of the Encyclopædists,

hardly seemed to have reached him at all. His poems of 1787[1] contained tales of love, of adventure and of mystery, bristling with barbarous names, with the "Gothic" apparatus of coats of mail, monastic habits, ruined castles, hermits' cells and generous ruffians, with Celtic or Saxon mythology, and with pastoral scenery, but there was not a single piece among them that bore proof of any sympathy for the lowly or of any desire for reform.

Very different was *The Peripatetic*, published in 1793. The French Revolution had wrought a deep change in the author;[2] the sentimentalist in him had become the henchman to the political and ethical thinker. It seems as if after the astounding events which followed the fall of the Bastille he had taken a sudden passion for French ideas, and been overpowered by the impetuosity of French enthusiasm. He was no longer content with pouring forth subjective emotions, or gratifying his taste for romance. The individualistic aspirations within him were now, for the most part, diverted from inner to outer objects, from himself to humanity: human pity and human love, social justice and social reform now engrossed

[1] In two volumes. The first volume only is preserved at the British Museum.

[2] It can hardly, we think, be argued that Thelwall was then at the age of mental formation, and that this change was the outcome of the natural growth of his mind. He was already twenty-three in 1787, had been from childhood a great reader of books, and had for the last five years attended the debates of the Coachmakers' Hall Society. Yet ambient influences had been incapable of bringing to full development his dormant qualities. The French Revolution, with its emotional force and intellectual stimulus, burst upon him like a sudden illumination.

his thoughts and filled his work. From the time of the publication of his *Peripatetic*, despite much awkwardness and didactic heaviness, by the choice of his subjects, the generosity of his feelings, the dignity of his inspiration, he deserves to be considered as the precursor of the ethical and social poetry of the nineteenth century, which was to unite intensity of passion and wealth of imagery with a noble appeal to individual and collective reformation.

The Peripatetic is one of the many works composed at that time in the form of travelling journals, which supplied the general demand for romantic description, tearful emotion, and moral disquisition. *The Sentimental Journey* had been the model of all. The peculiarities which distinguish Sterne's narrative from Thelwall's discursive miscellany of prose and verse exemplify the changes effected in the romantic spirit by the outbreak of the French Revolution.

Thelwall has still a capacity for shedding tears, in common with the famous master of sentimentalism; but he had developed new qualities that through many imperfections already foreshadowed (as we shall show in the course of this chapter) the dignity, weightiness and high purpose of nineteenth century literature. The subject-matter of the book, a ramble in the environs of London, was nothing but a convenient device for introducing digressions on moral and social topics which the author had most at heart. The characters were meant to be the mouthpieces of Thelwall's indignation against the abuses existing in England, and present generally among mankind. The

tone was not merely decorous and serious, but intensely righteous and philosophical. Nature in it played an important part, either affording relief from the strain of thought, or providing in itself material for elevated ethical developments.

Not only does *The Peripatetic* figure honourably as a work that opened the way for the revival of poetry, but we have come to believe that it exerted a direct influence upon Wordsworth. As far as the general plan is concerned, *The Peripatetic* has no small likeness to *The Excursion*. Let the reader imagine a poet of genius, adopting the same design of a ramble or "excursion," conveying through the dialogue, the digressions and the episodes, the philosophical and the social views which he thinks conducive to the welfare of mankind, giving to Nature a prominent importance, but blending description and disquisition into an artistic whole, clothing thought in symbols and truth in images, introducing lifelike consistency and affecting pathos, creating a poetical style as truthful as the descriptions, as dignified as the ideas, as vivid as the imagery—let this be kept in mind, and it will be understood how Wordsworth, without being thereby in the least belittled, may have been in some degree indebted to his obscure predecessor. Some points of resemblance in the composition of the two poems are singularly telling. There are three chief characters in either work: Theophrastus, in *The Peripatetic*, represents Thelwall and corresponds to the Poet in *The Excursion;* Ambulator, a well-travelled friend and the author's companion in the ramble, answers to

the Wanderer, the friendly pedlar and the poet's guide; Arisor, a chance companion, sceptical and bent on sneering, represents the Solitary, the misanthropist and derider of any generous enthusiasm. There is in *The Peripatetic*, as in *The Excursion*, a churchyard scene, where the three chief characters are described pausing by the side of selected tombs and indulging in apposite moralisings.

Biographical particulars bear out the inference based upon inner evidence. Wordsworth spent the year 1797 at Alfoxden in constant intercourse and intimate communion of thought with Coleridge, then living at Nether Stowey, four miles off. The latter was in the heyday of a recent friendship with Thelwall, and keeping up with him an active correspondence, replete with tokens of high esteem for the Reformer's character and literary talent, and, in particular, bearing testimony that he had of late read and appreciated *The Peripatetic*.[1] Coleridge could not but have spoken eulogiously of Thelwall and his work to Wordsworth. It even so chanced that Wordsworth became personally acquainted with the author of *The Peripatetic* in the summer of the same year, and greatly valued his intellectual and moral qualities.[2] Now, it was there and then that

[1] From Coleridge to J. Thelwall, 22nd June, 1796. "Letters of S. T. Coleridge," edited by E. H. Coleridge, 1895, vol. i., p. 166.

[2] In the summer of 1797 Thelwall came to beg admittance into the small circle of literary and philosophical friends at Nether Stowey. The arrival of the militant Jacobin almost roused to riot the loyal population of the village, and made his settlement there impossible. Wordsworth's judgment of him is

Wordsworth conceived the design of his great poem, the first title of which was to be *The Pedlar*.[1] For all these reasons we venture to conclude that the resemblance between *The Peripatetic* and the later form of *The Pedlar* is more than a fortuitous coincidence. The fact in no way detracts from Wordsworth's originality and mastery, while it may serve to link the poet's mature production with his youthful revolutionary enthusiasm, and to evidence the unity of his thought.[2]

In the days of Sterne, the man of feeling might be humorous and gaily licentious. Twenty-five years later, he was intent upon too mighty problems to indulge in light or wanton jollity. Thelwall is almost always grave. He is fond of representing himself lost in "contemplation," or exquisitely tortured by "melancholy." Melancholy first suggested to him to alleviate his pain by pouring it forth in verse, and stamped him a poet:

recorded in the "Fenwick Note" to *Anecdotes for Fathers*: "He really was a man of extraordinary talent . . ., etc." *Wordsworth's Poetical Works*, edited by W. Knight, vol. i., p. 234.

[1] In a letter of Coleridge to his brother George, April, 1798, are quoted lines of Wordsworth containing the leading philosophical doctrine of *The Excursion*, which formed later lines, 1207-1224 of Book IV. of the poem ("Coleridge's Letters," vol. i., p. 244). In the "Fenwick Note" to *The Excursion*, Wordsworth confirms that in 1797-1798 his thoughts were taken up with elaborating the plan of his *Excursion* (Knight's Edition, vol. v., p. 1).

[2] The indebtedness of Wordsworth's mature work to the emotional and intellectual influence of the French Revolution is what we have tried to elucidate in several chapters of our book on the "French Revolution and English Poets."

"Such were the notes, to lull my woe,
When first I wak'd the rustic string,
Blest Contemplation taught to flow,
While o'er me waved her seraph wing."
—*The Peripatetic*, i., 13.

Melancholy would perversely invade his rare moments of relaxation from thought or anxiety. Even while enjoying a beautiful landscape, traversed by the winding Thames, he would cast an introspective glance on himself and liken his life to those waters, which rushed past on their way towards the indistinct horizon and left no trace of their passage. "When the passions are vivid and the fancy strong, the feelings will, of course, be eccentric: and Melancholy may sometimes be expected to awaken the pangs of hopeless ambition amid the beauties of the vernal prospect." (*The Peripatetic*, i., 206.)

He prized melancholy for the thrill of feeling, for the inward melting of the heart which accompanied it. Likewise he cherished all the rapturous emotions which blur, as it were, the consciousness of the real, and drown the soul in ecstasy. He sought the ravishment of love, of romantic love, enhanced by all that soul-beauty may add to the attractiveness of woman. He had met, at her parents' house in the country, a guileless girl of fifteen, whose simple charm had seduced him. He resolved to instruct her in the true notions of "reason" and the delicate ways of "sensibility," and to make her a model wife. He carried on his design by means of a frequent correspondence and of repeated visits till Stella had attained a suitable age and the wished

for accomplishments. He married her (in 1791), and she became the faithful mate, who, later on, courageously stood by him through the trials of his short but eventful public life.

He made his love the subject of verses, which singularly differ in tone and inspiration from the then prevalent court and drawing-room madrigals. Barring the diction, which is still weighed down by classic artificiality, these verses are a not unsuccessful attempt at sincerely expressing noble passion. They are addressed to a friend:

"Oh! thou canst never guess—canst never conceive
What rapturous charms in love-touch'd Beauty live, . . .
When the long-sever'd maid, whom passion warms,
With joy commutual rushes to your arms,
Drops the fond head upon your throbbing breast,
And yields to feelings not to be supprest.
'Tis not the thrilling touch of sensual joys
(Which Nature's boon to lowest brutes supplies) . . .
That wakes (whate'er the vulgar mind may deem)
The richest transports of their pure esteem,
Whose flames, that glow from intellectual fire,
Give soul to Sense and defecate Desire.
No: their best joys from nobler sources spring. . . .
Soul joined with soul, the sympathising mind,
Truth undefil'd—and feelings all refin'd,
One spirit guiding—by one will inform'd—
And two fond bosoms by one essence warm'd."
—*The Peripatetic*, ii., 83.

No wonder, then, that Thelwall attributed to love a purifying and refining power, that enlarges man's capacity of feeling, humanises the soul:

"'Tis hence, perhaps—from this ethereal glow
(Where grosser passion claims no sordid part)

> That all the fine, ecstatic feelings flow
> That lift the fancy and expand the heart !
> Hence all the quick perceptions ; hence the nerve
> That feels alike for all the sentient sphere,
> For every joy a transport can reserve,
> For every sorrow shed the pitying tear. . . ."
> —*The Peripatetic*, ii., 147.

Universal love for all the forms of being, and the melancholy contemplative mood that attunes the heart to the pulse of nature, were with Thelwall but the initiatory steps to the one feeling which in his eyes summed up the perfection of the soul: sympathy for man. This feeling he placed highest in the scale of "sensibility," because it most significantly heralded and most powerfully furthered a coming change in the economy of government and of society. Philanthropy with him sometimes took the traditional Christian form of charity—which he indeed did not consider as a mechanical gesture in order to get rid of intruders, but as an act of duty and of love. His companion, Ambulator, handing a few pence to begging boys, "bestowed them with a heart-speaking smile of ecstasy, that never, no never, shall gild the countenance of any but the feeling and generous. . . . We pursued our journey with a holy melancholy pleasure." (*The Peripatetic*, ii., 88.)

He joined in the efforts of the few generous men who amid sneers and rebukes were endeavouring to awaken the conscience of the nation to the shame and horror of the slave trade. As forcibly as the far-fetched conceits and intricate periphrases which then constituted "poetical diction" permitted, he appealed to the pity of the rich who drank their coffee or

anointed themselves with their fragrant oils, heedless of the human sufferings which these luxuries had cost. In the tone of indignant irony, he exclaimed:

"At morn, at eve, your sweeten'd bev'rage sup,
Nor see the blood of thousands in the cup! . . .
What though each sweet effluvium, ere it rise,
Have clogg'd the western gale with Afric's sighs,
Each sweeten'd drop your porc'lain cell contains
Was drawn, oh, horror! from some brother's veins,
Or, wrought by chemic art, on terms too dear,
Is but transmuted from some negro's tear,
Which dropt, 'midst galling bonds, on foreign strand,
His bride still answers from his native land:
Still turn indiff'rent from these foreign woes,
Nor suffer griefs so distant to oppose
The sickly taste, whose languid pulse to cheer
Two rifled worlds must drop the bitter tear! . . ."
—*The Peripatetic*, i., 35.

More often it was nearer him that Thelwall found objects of compassion and consequent causes of indignation. He sympathised with the labourers[1] in town and in country, whose condition was truly miserable in his time. They, he thought, endured pain and hardship to provide the wealthy with food, raiment and all useful things, and were requited but by indifference or contempt at the hands of their "betters." Thelwall's sympathy for them rested on philosophical, as well as on humanitarian grounds. Not only was he moved to pity by their hard lot, but in the meanest of them he reverenced the eminent

[1] *Vide* in Chap. III. of the present book his account of the condition of city and farm labourers at the end of the eighteenth century.

dignity of manhood, and he hailed the supreme faculty of "reason." Ignorance indeed, vicious habits, and chiefly the oppression under which society had unjustly and inhumanely crushed the greater number, had momentarily dimmed in the masses the light of intelligence. But the noble attribute survived in all, and would be restored to efficiency, if misery, subjection and the degradation consequent thereon were removed. Thelwall shared in the philosophical belief, spread by J. J. Rousseau and emphasised by the French Revolution, that the spiritual nature of man entitles every individual to equal rights, and that it is incumbent upon society to secure these rights for all. He himself, as a talented man of letters, at a time when writing for bread was but a poor trade, and as a non-elector, resented his social unimportance. He belonged to the class that was kept down by the combined effort of the law and of opinion. He felt himself in fellowship with the lowly, and his sympathy was nurtured both by a human feeling of pity and the democratic longing for justice.

He had deep at heart the respect of man. In his rambles about London, when he entered into conversations with simple people, as he often did, he was careful to avoid any form of speech that might let his interlocutors detect a superiority in him, and prompt them to such humble professions or acts as poor people are prone to from habits of submission. (*Peripatetic*, i. 52.) Often to his attentive mind the very essence of manhood would reveal itself in the lowly under the coarseness of the outer man or through the mental deformations wrought by social oppression.

He rejoiced at these discoveries, as when he had occasion to write down in his Journal during a pedestrian excursion in Wales: "Near Gloucester. Two poor labouring men sitting on a seat in the churchyard, and enjoying the prospect. The mass only ignorant, not insensate. . . ."[1]

He pleaded leniency for common people when they behaved unmannerly, on account of ignorance. He proposed as a model the conduct of Ambulator. His friend was one of those men "who would brush by a titled friend to take unconnected Merit by the hand, and would give the first salutation to indigent Sensibility, though purse-proud Opulence was thronging every corner of the room." Once he was crossing a muddy street, when a fellow that looked like a drayman came splashing by him, and, adding insolence to rudeness, abused him, calling him Jack-a-Dandy. A flush of anger rose to the young man's face. He rushed at the ruffian and seized him by the collar. The suddenness of the attack, the plucky attitude of the city man, rendered the boor powerless. What was the abused philanthropist to do? Improve his advantage to the utmost? Even in this gust of passion he remained firm in his principles. Holding the drayman at arm's length, he bade him in a calm, commanding voice: learn for the future to respect his fellow-creatures! (*Peripatetic*, i. 88.)

[1] MS. "Notes of Pedestrian Excursion, Documents of Employment of Time in Wales," etc., one vol. Late in the possession of F. W. Cosens, then of J. Dykes Campbell; acquired by us at the sale of the latter's library, at Sotheby's, June, 1904.

The "friend of man," however, appeared in a less debonair character when he had to deal with those who were responsible for the present misery of the many. From pondering upon the disgrace and the sufferings of the multitude, Thelwall's mind not seldom grew incensed with anger. He penned scathing denunciations of social injustice. In verse and in prose, he stigmatised wealth, the evil offspring of greed and spoliation, and pride, the heinous vice which corrupts the heart and destroys good-will among men.

> "Let pride no more, in pamper'd state,
> Exulting in an empty name,
> On trampled crowds her throne elate
> And labour's honest earnings claim."
>
> —*The Peripatetic*, i. 31.

He wished that hereditary titles might be cancelled, and that nothing but true merit should differentiate one individual from another.

> "Let false distinction's pageant flee,
> Be worth and parts alone rever'd."
>
> —*Id.*

Who was the gentleman? "We perversely dignify with this title every two-legged being whom fortune has elevated above the common feelings of humanity!" (*The Peripatetic*, i., 133.) The famous saying of Wat Tyler was heard to ring again four centuries after he and his peasant horde had been slaughtered by Richard II. The chief of the Lollards was a figure which the philosophical and political innovators of that time were fond of conjuring up; Thelwall complacently

related his story in a long episode of *The Peripatetic*, vol. ii., p. 20 *ff*).[1]

Rich land-owners at that time had been known to evict the population of a whole village from their poor dwellings in order to enlarge their hunting grounds, or to open a vista, or to satisfy in any other way their lordly fancy. Such acts of feudal despotism could not pass unnoticed by the leaders of the literary and social reform. Already, twenty years earlier, Goldsmith had raised an indignant protest against them in his *Deserted Village*. Thelwall now renewed the onset. Picturing to himself the miserable fate of the cottagers, driven to the unwholesome slums of cities, he exclaimed: "Shame upon thee, unfeeling Grandeur! If the spreading branches of thy pride afford not shelter to the lowly useful shrubs that spring by nature round thee, what is thy worth to man? If thy fruitless boughs spread desolation over the tract they cover, Reason cries out to fell thee to the earth! Be wise, then; learn humanity in time, before the indignation of mankind (whose patience, like his powers, is limited) lay the keen axe to the root, and exclaim with uplifted arm, 'Why cumbereth it the ground?'" (*The Peripatetic*, i., 136.) These words, uttered in the heat of passion, we must not take as expressing the spirit in which the writer desired a reform to be effected. His fiery temper carried him away to excesses of language, that accorded with momentary flights of excitement, but considerably overreached the permanent tenour of his considerate thought. When, a little later, he

[1] *Cf.* Robert Southey's juvenile drama, *Wat Tyler*.

became a public lecturer, such "literary" outbursts, elicited as they were by his talent of oratory, were a constant danger, from which he did not wholly guard himself. Yet, as we shall show, he had a moderate practical plan of reform, which his very enthusiasm helped him to uphold through the most trying circumstances.

Sympathy for man called on him to enter the political arena, and wage the fight for democracy at the head of the Reform party. He was led by noble and disinterested motives. Low, demagogic ambition could hardly have found any gratification in those days of suspicion and persecution. Thelwall knew that labour and talent lavished unstintedly, risks incurred, hardships borne, would be his lot without any compensating advantage. Yet he was urged on by the voice of duty.

"The heart's torn fibres feel the call severe!
The heart's best pleasures fly, with trembling wing.
Ah! most unblest, whom thoughts like these inspire.
His eyes no more shall tranquil slumbers close;
His proudest joy—a feverish transient fire!
His fairest hope—a catalogue of woes! . . .

"Imperious Duty, rigid Spartan guide!
Strew, strew at times a rose among the thorns;
Or steel each votive breast with stoic pride,
Till, from the gloom, resurgent Virtue dawns."
—"To Stella, Dec., 1796." *Poems chiefly Written in Retirement.* Published in 1802; p. 123.

Amid present dangers he had faith in the ultimate triumph of justice, or, as he said, of "Virtue," and derived strength to do his appointed task from the visionary joy of the happiness to come.

". . . O'er the storm
(Of innate worth secure) the naked form
Of Patient Virtue, in the trying hour,
Majestic towers, while Faction's raging power
Howls through the trembling desolated clime;
Unmoved she stands, deserted, yet sublime,
The people's secret love—the hope of future time."
—*The Peripatetic.*

Among the leaders of the early democratic movement, Thelwall's character shines with a pure glow of devotedness, candour, and love. His private correspondence bears out the sincerity of the feelings expressed in his poems. In letters which were never intended to be read before any admiring circle of *literati*, in confidential effusions to Stella, he appears, as in his published work, in the light of a poet, an enthusiast, the self-ordained apostle of humanity. "Why," he writes, "should I not equal the wonders of ancient eloquence? I have a nobler cause than antiquity ever pleaded. Cicero argued for his client; Demosthenes thundered for the glory and independence of a little city. I advocate the cause of the human race, the rights of the universe, the happiness of ages yet unborn. I wish you could see the passion in which this has been written. It is such a passion as a man ought to feel. There is not one atom of malevolence, personality, or resentment mingled with it. I could wish Pitt, Dundas, and the House of Brunswick to participate in the happiness I burn to produce."[1]

Universal sympathy and a rational ideal, as we have shown, "sensibility" and "philosophy,"

[1] "Life," p. 368, 20th Sept., 1795.

concurred to rouse and to keep alive in Thelwall the love of man. We shall find a union of the same emotional and intellectual elements in his love of nature.

Quite characteristic of the romantic and revolutionary school was the revival of pastoral feeling at the end of the eighteenth century. With the emotions derived from the contemplation of nature, it associated an ideal of civic progress, republican simplicity, and philosophic happiness. It set up homely country life as an antithesis to complex civilisation. It sought the beauty of nature outside cities, as it sought the beauty of love, justice, and virtue outside the conventionality, selfishness, and corruption of court and drawing-room. Like all pastoral poetry since the Renaissance, it was indebted to the ancient fiction of the Golden Age; but it made a new application of the old Arcadian dreams to the present aspirations of democracy. To the notions borrowed from the ancients it joined the Christian feeling of the fellowship of men, and in its visions of the future portrayed a world where all would live in moral frugality, and in the practice of universal benevolence. Thus the lover of nature appeared also in the character of a lover of virtue.

Thelwall had early fed on Beattie's poems, and delighted in the perusal of Gray's Letters.[1] Like many of his contemporaries, he devoted part of the summer, as often as he could, to a walking excursion through some picturesque country, and kept a journal of the minutest sights and occurrences of the journey,

[1] See *The Peripatetic*, passim.

mingling description with subjective effusions, and with observations on the condition of the people.

Some of these notes supplied him with the matter of *The Peripatetic.* Many remain unpublished in the closely written pages of the MSS. which are to-day in our possession. It would carry us too far to expatiate upon the purely literary features of these travelling journals. Suffice it to say that the descriptions are true, full of concrete details, pleasantly written, and that, as was generally the case with the young writers of the sentimental and imaginative school, Thelwall was chiefly attracted by romantic nature, mountainous landscapes, rocky banks, majestic woods and moonlight scenes. But it will serve our purpose to dwell at some length upon the moral and social views which he closely connected with his love of nature.

His philosophy will be readily intelligible if it is borne in mind that for him, as for J. J. Rousseau, civilisation was a decadence and a corruption from the moral purity of a supposed "state of nature." No doubt the progress of the arts, the increase of knowledge, the improvement in society were valuable blessings. But knowledge had not been imparted to all; the riches created by the development of arts and sciences had given rise to the detestable passions of greed and ambition, and to the consequent evils of subjection and misery; complex government had made it easy for the ruling few to betray and enslave the dispossessed many. Thelwall, like so many well-wishing, single-minded idealists of the time of the French Revolution, had not sufficient depth of thought, breadth of culture or intellectual patience to

make a thorough inquiry into the intricate elusive problem of human progress. He neither grasped the complexity of individual and social happiness, nor attempted to conciliate inherited habits with rational notions or the realities of the past with the possibilities of the future. A difference, it is true, must be made between his doctrine, such as it is stated in his books, and his practice, such as it appears from his public actions. As a leader of the Reform movement—guided by the instinctive political prudence of the British race and a steady sense of reality—he never raised any but moderate contentions, which, had it not been for the panic, would have made for the redress of long-standing abuses and a much needed change in the Government. As a sentimentalist and a philosopher, on the other hand, his whole soul yearned for total justice and absolute virtue.

His hopes of happiness to come were countenanced by the spectacle of idealised present country life; his vision of a beauteous future was inseparable from the contemplation of the beauties of nature.

Nature, he thought, had a beneficent influence on the intellect and the heart.[1] Taking man away from the pursuit of gain, keeping down in him vicious inclinations and aggressive impulses, it gave him a peaceful and meditative cast of mind:

[1] The reader, we trust, will notice, when reading the following pages, how much of this nature feeling and nature philosophy prior to, or contemporary with, the French Revolution, Wordsworth retained, although qualifying the singleness of the thought by a deeper insight into the moral being of man, and by the experience born from witnessing the tragedy of the French Revolution.

"To calm Reflection's sober train
Each plant a useful lesson gives;
A moraliser, on the plain,
Each turf and smiling blossom lives."
—*The Peripatetic*, i., 12.

The animal world offered us examples worthy of imitation. The stork, "whose graceful wing aloft the feeble parent bears," the pelican "whose fond maternal breast to all the younglings of her nest pours nutritive the vital stream," taught us unselfishness. The very sight of inanimate nature instilled kindness into our inmost being:

"For who with serious eye can view
These scenes the Muse delights to hail,
Or Meditation's flight pursue,
Nor feel the generous thought prevail:
From Nature's hand on all around
(Meads graz'd by flocks, and choral shades),
Since Love's benignant stamp is found,
And Sympathy thro' all pervades."
—*The Peripatetic*, i., 102.

Would that all those who were appointed to play a leading part in the world had guarded themselves from the blight of city corruption, and have a chance at intervals to leave the crowded haunts of men, and learn from country people frugal content, domestic happiness, calm of mind and gladness of heart! Would that they, like Thelwall himself, when they settled in life, had chosen a life-mate

"Arrayed in rustic innocence, and gay
With all the modest graces that adorn
The unadulterate mind. . . ."
—"To Stella, Dec., 1796." *Poems chiefly Written in Retirement*, p. 121.

"... Simplicity herself, ...
In semblance fair, a blooming village maid. ...
. . . . . .
Ye mincing daughters of fantastic Pride,
Ye glittering flies who pant in Folly's chase,
Votaries of Fashion, lay your airs aside—
Come here and learn the charms of real grace!"
—"Stanzas written in 1790." *Id.*, 109.

The labour of the field or of the farm-house, with the addition of some handicraft like spinning or weaving, seemed to him to be surrounded by an atmosphere of wholesomeness and joy, which formed a striking contrast with the toil of the city, or of the factory. In the rural district of Gloucestershire where he had been journeying,

"Industry,
Even from the dawning to the western ray,
And oft by midnight taper, patient plies
Her task assiduous; and the day with songs,
The night with many an earth-star, far descried
By the lone traveller, cheers amidst her toil. ...
... By her
Sits lowly Comfort, in her decent stole
(If homely, yet commodious), dealing round
The well-earned bread of sustenance. ..."
—"On leaving the Bottoms of Gloucestershire, Aug., 1797." *Poems*, 137.

All-transforming nature, in the eyes of the poet, exalted to grandeur and beauty even those unredeemable idlers and land-buccaneers, the rambling gipsies:

"Poor harmless vagrants!—harmless when compar'd
With those whom crowds adore and courts reward ...
Still rove secure; and may no beadle's thong
Remorseless drive your wandering groups along;
But still to ye may wood and heath supply
The darling boon of savage liberty!"
"Epistle to Mercutio, 1791." *Poems*, 114.

He drew the half-real, half-imaginative picture of a village squatted on the border of a gentleman's estate. The picturesqueness of its outline, the quiet stir of the life around it, the glow of happiness that pervaded every thing and every being in it, blended into one harmonious whole, particularly meant to move the feeling heart. "Can anything form a more delightful contrast to the stately pile, whose ornamented pillars are hewn from the costly treasures of the quarry, the surrounding groves, the spacious walks, the laboured stream, the Attic temple, and the decorating statue and all the splendid works of taste and magnificence, than the humble thatch, covered perhaps with the mantling vine, the little casement, the rustic wicket and the fence of gorse or osier that secures a few pot-herbs from invading cattle? Can anything more enliven the scene than the pranks of ruddy infants, poured from beneath the lowly roof; the whistle of the honest husbandman, trudging cheerfully to his toil at morn, or his plodding gait at evening when, wearied with his daily task, propping his steps upon the crooked staff snatched promiscuously from the adjacent thicket, he returns contentedly home, and smiles to see the little column of smoke circling from his chimney, which betokens the preparations for his homely repast?" (*The Peripatetic*, i., 139, 140.)

What wonder, then, that Thelwall, aware of the beauty, the joy, the morality which nature bestowed on life, should exclaim: "Better would it be for mankind that the sources of national and even of mental glory were for ever diverted and dried up, than that the streams of rural production should be

impeded in their course, or that Corruption should be permitted to pollute her limpid waves!" (*The Peripatetic*, ii., 3, 4.)

Thus Thelwall—who, indeed, was neither a creative artist nor a deep philosopher, but whose quick, responsive mind readily drank in the new intellectual and emotional impulses of his age—lets us into the privacy of that "love of nature," which became so important an element in the spirit of the innovating writers at the end of the eighteenth century.

Was he to any degree conscious that his golden view of rural happiness was a captivating but fallacious poetical fiction, which corresponded to no reality in the England of his time? The contrast between the poems or the prose lyrics of *The Peripatetic* and the MS. notes of his pedestrian excursions is a sufficient answer to the question. The unpublished Journal contains a long list of minute and precise details on the hard condition of field-labourers.[1] We read in it gloomy descriptions of their slovenly appearance, wretched hovels, miserable living and brutal manners, along with laments on the heartlessness of land-owners or farmers, and the injustice of the then system of property. Already, in *The Peripatetic*, the sneering Arisor had drawn a sombre picture of the dulness, rudeness, mere animalism, and actual pauperism of the peasants, in opposition to the idealised vision of Ambulator and Theophrastus. Yes, Thelwall knew that the village-hind and the country-wench were not the

[1] We quote some of his observations, with figures, in Chapter III. of the present work.

idyllic characters whom he was pleased to imagine, and that most cottagers of England, towards 1790, were far from happy. But under the rough rind of coarseness he fancied he saw the pure heart of the the "man of nature." Behind the forbidding outward of extreme abjection, which he considered a momentary disfigurement, he discovered the potentiality of true wisdom and virtue.

He cherished this illusion, or—as he would fain have put it—this approximation to future truth, as a man, in order to be comforted through the weary round of corrupt city-life; as a writer, in order to gain others to the beauty of the ideal; as a reformer, in order to base upon it, as we shall show, a scheme of agrarian law, meant to remedy the most glaring inequalities of fortune.

2. While delineating the "man of feeling" in Thelwall, we have had occasion to show how closely sensibility and intellectuality were allied in him. Thus far we have insisted on the traits of his personality related to the revival of sentiment in literature. We will now describe the second great influence which affected him — the revival of thought, or "philosophy," as it was termed by the contemporaries.

The philosophy of the eighteenth century, more than any other product of the human mind, was noticeable for its mixed character of greatness and of weakness. It has won an undying title to the admiration of posterity by its eagerness for knowledge, its actual achievements in the investigation of facts and in the making of scientific laws, its

width of ken and generosity of purpose. On the other hand, carried away by its very buoyancy, its noble ambition, and its benevolent aspirations, it proved deficient in the two necessary qualities of accuracy and considerateness. It was characterised by a propensity for fluent, abstract reasoning and by a strange impatience in inferring wide conclusions from scanty, undigested materials. It boldly launched forth sweeping principles and rash hypotheses, some indeed to shine as load-stars of truth, others to dazzle and betray. Foremost among its generous errors was the belief that a science of government and of society, which might help men out of the unrest then universally felt, could be built upon the foundation of a few leading facts.

The movement of political and social inquiry originated in France, and assumed there three main aspects. Montesquieu elaborated a theory of the several forms of government, seemingly resting on a vast mass of historical evidence, in reality full of *a priori* reasoning. The soundest and most reliable part of his work, namely, his chapters on the English limited monarchy, did not produce so deep an impression upon the contemporary political thinkers as his chapters on democracy, which exalted the small republics of antiquity, and set up an ideal of public virtue borrowed from Plutarch's "Life of Lycurgus."

Then J. J. Rousseau, applying the tenets of spiritualistic philosophy to a revolutionary view of government, deduced from the spiritual identity of souls (through "reason") the equality of the

"natural" and "civic" rights of men. Thence the principles of the sovereignty of the people, of universal suffrage, of the essentially elective and merely representative character of governors, of the superiority of the republic as the only rational form of government, of the right to revolution. Thence also—though J. J. Rousseau did not himself draw this consequence from his premises, and left it for his disciple Mably to formulate—the notion that all should have an equal burden of labour and an equal share in the proceeds of labour. Social reform as well as republican aspirations were implied in the doctrine of Rousseau.[1]

Lastly, the Encyclopædists, with Diderot, d'Alembert, Helvetius and d'Holbach at their head, chiefly aimed at a moral reform which should rid men of exploded habits of thinking and feeling, and ultimately bring about a political renovation. They devised the theory of "mechanicalism," which represented the soul as a machine acted on by the law of "necessity" (determinism, as we should say), and society as an artificial product, whose generating principle was the law of "utility." They claimed Locke as their ancestor, and professed themselves empiricists; but after proceeding a little way on the uneasy road of experience, they turned off abruptly into logical deduction, and met J. J. Rousseau on the ground of rational perfection and radical reform. The English

[1] Thomas Paine was its exponent in America and in England, first through his sensational pamphlet "Common Sense," and next at the time of the French Revolution through the First and Second Parts of "The Rights of Man."

disciple of the Encyclopædists, William Godwin, gave to the doctrine a systematic cohesion, which it had not attained in France, and carried it, through mere logical consistency, to a scheme of political anarchy and of communistic ownership under the guidance of universal benevolence. Let us add that Godwin's inquiry was essentially theoretical, his conclusions professedly speculative, and that he emphatically declared himself averse to any change effected by violent means.

These three doctrines, the would-be historic, the rationalistic, and the mechanical, though they had a different starting-point and an apparently distinct character, were united by one fundamental inner similitude: the reforming spirit. Whatever form of government they recommended—constitutional monarchy, republic, or even benevolent despotism—they claimed under it more liberty, more equality, more justice for all classes. Whatever choice of outward institutions they made, the State, according to their wishes, should be democratic at the core.

Thelwall, whose feelings imperiously pressed upon him democratic convictions, but whose mind wavered between the various philosophical systems, borrowed from each notions not always strictly consistent, but tending all to democratise the English Government and society.

He was a true representative of the spirit of the age by his longing for knowledge and his taste for ratiocination. In 1791, at twenty-seven years of age, when he was a fairly prosperous man of letters and had just married, he matriculated as a student at

Guy's and St. Thomas' Hospitals, not with the intention of becoming a doctor or a surgeon, but merely to study anatomy and chemistry. Two years later he published a treatise entitled: "A Definition of Animal Vitality," in which he freely dabbled with the philosophical arcana of the medical science. This essay, read by the author before the Physical Society of Guy's Hospital, was hailed by the audience as a wonderful revelation of shadowy truths. A few months later, Thelwall had a second paper ready to be presented to the Society "On the Origin of Sensation." But in the interval, he had been exposed as a dangerous agitator, and had become an object of horror to the loyal practitioners who formed the greater part of the Society. The meeting took place, but a violent uproar was raised, and the philosophical democrat could not make himself heard. Neither of the two papers has been preserved, but from the circumstances of their composition and the general characteristics of the author's thought, it is easy to conjecture that they were of hasty and superficial generalisation.

A MS. jotting, intended as the leading thought of a dissertation or lecture, shows the connection in Thelwall between the scientific and the political reasoner. He wrote: "Man has, from his very faculties, a physical and moral power and aptitude for research. It is his right and duty to apply this power to objects important to human happiness. Government is of primary importance to the happiness, morals, and very existence of man." (MSS., vol. iii., intended as an answer to Burke.) Let reason address itself to remoulding

the fabric of society, and wonderful progress will be seen. Burke, he knew, violently deprecated the intervention of reason in matters of government. But Burke was blinded by class prejudice and urged by personal interest. Thelwall, when he read him, pen in hand, broke out into impatient and indignant ejaculations. "Political speculations, mere amusements! . . . They stake the lives of millions!" (MSS., iii.)

He could not leave the gifted Parliamentarian's heresies unanswered. After such prominent Reformers as Thomas Paine, Priestley, and Mary Wollstonecraft, he in his turn indited a refutation of the Burkian doctrine in his "Sober Reflections on the Seditious and Inflammatory 'Letter to a Noble Lord'" (1796). Burke had poured the feelings of his impetuous nature, and flashed forth his creed through impassioned rhetoric; Thelwall too could write with his heart and his imagination. "If they could destroy the real reformers—the men of reason, of humanity, of intellect—they would destroy the magnets (if I may so express myself) around which, whenever their influence shall become sufficiently diffused through the intelligent atmosphere, the good sense, the spirit, the virtue of the country must be attracted; and when it is so attracted, and when the parts shall firmly and peacefully cohere, and then, brought under the influence of the true laws of nature, shall press together with the united force of attraction and gravitation to one common centre of truth, the seven days' work of the creation is complete, the system is restored to order, and the unruly tempest of tyranny and corruption shall

endeavour in vain to prolong the reign of chaos." ("Sober Reflections," p. 81.)

It was the firm belief of Thelwall that, in proportion as reason gained ground, not only would prejudice be ousted, but selfishness and greed be shamed out of existence, and a revolution be accomplished peacefully in the minds of men and in society. In this respect he was a disciple more of Godwin than of Rousseau. He harboured in his heart, as much as in his intellect, the conviction that the human reason, when it would at last develop in perfect freedom, unwarped by existing institutions, prevalent methods of education, the depression of misery or the corruption of rank and wealth, would of itself turn to truth and universal love. Benevolence was a no less natural propensity of the heart than reason a natural gift of the intellect. Let, then, the men who had through philosophy reached a state of comparative wisdom and goodwill speak out, "with a voice that may resound from the Equator to the Poles, and make the antipodes reverberate the accents of Truth and the maxims of Liberty and Justice." ("Opening of the Speech at the Copenhagen House Meeting, 26th of October, 1795.")

Let no violence be used against those who oppose the inevitable change, because they are blinded and know not what they do. "Reason and the pure spirit of philosophy are essential to the future state of social independence, and these will teach us to consider that every action, however hostile to the sacred cause we are pursuing, is the unhappy consequence of errors resulting from the circumstances by which

the actor has been surrounded. . . . We ought to pity the instrument while we redress the evil." ("Lecture on Spies and Informers, 1795.") There was little fear, moreover, that the wished-for enlightenment should be deferred to a remote and uncertain period. Like Thomas Paine and Godwin, Thelwall, made sanguine by the favourable issue of the first years of the French Revolution, hoped soon to see happier times for the lowly and oppressed of England. "The friends of liberty know that sooner or later the progress of reason must produce, *perhaps at no distant period*, an essential reformation in the government and institutions of this country." ("Sober Reflections," p. 34.)

How was love of country to be conciliated with love of man? This was one of the problems which confronted the "philosophers" of that time. Such as we know them, there is little doubt but that they would subordinate traditional patriotism, which sanctioned so many abuses and iniquities, to the rational feeling of universal sympathy, which bade fair to blend all mankind into one brotherhood. Now, love of country was rationalised so as to agree with love of man, whenever an alliance was possible. Now, "national patriotism" was sacrificed (in theory, at least) to "human patriotism," whenever a clash between the two sentiments was inevitable.

It was not merely for his fellow-countrymen, but for mankind at large, that Thelwall wished the benefits of an intellectual and political reformation to be secured. Internationalism, as well as democracy, was part of his creed. He hated war:

"O thou, fond Many! what hadst thou to do
In kindred blood the corslet to imbrue?

. . . . . .

As herds to slaughter by their owners led,
Dumb and unconscious of the cause, ye bled;
The titled ruffian the pretence supplied,
And as he frowned, the abject millions died. . . ."

—*The Peripatetic*, iii., 100.

He appealed to reason and to feeling for the sake of universal peace. In every human being he hailed a fellow-creature. "Man looks in the face of man, and in every individual he sees indeed a brother, or a part rather of his own existence, another self. . . . He enfolds the universe in one large embrace, and finds an eternal source of rational gratification in contemplating the felicity, or labouring to mitigate the calamities, of his fellow-beings. . . . State hypocrites preach about hostile interests, patriotism and natural enmity! Natural enmity! Are not all men brothers by the law of Nature that submits them all to the same physical conditions and the same moral impulses? . . . It is the great precept of Nature that man should seek his own felicity by labouring for the happiness of mankind." ("Spies and Informers, 1795.") The word "patriotism" even lost its limited acceptation, and came to mean devotion to liberty, humanity and justice, wherever these birthrights of men were invaded. At home "patriots" were those who took an active part in the struggle for juster laws and a fairer distribution of wealth. Abroad, some individuals acquired no small renown as "patriots" of the world, such as the Englishman, Thomas Paine, and the American, Joel Barlow.

Early in his career, Thelwall became a "patriot" in the new style. Three years before the French Revolution, and before he was versed in French philosophy, as a Bill on imprisonment for debt was being moved in Parliament, he wrote a poem against the intended measure, to shame his country for her departure from her glorious traditions of liberty and justice. He intimated that she could remain an object of love only as long as she was an object of respect:

> "Is this the land where liberal feelings glow?
> Is this the land where Justice holds the scale?
> The felon's lot must pale Disaster know,
> And freemen give Misfortune's sons a gaol."
> —"Elegy, 1796." *Poems chiefly Written in Retirement*, p. 100.

When England, after a moment's hesitation, yielding to the panic and to racial hatred, sided with the Coalition against France, Thelwall was one of those who suffered the hard alternative of deserting either their country or the cause of liberty:

> "So! hapless Britain! in a later age
> I see thy sword against the rights engage;
> See thee, in mad delusion, blindly pour
> Devoted armies in a foreign shore,
> To aid the cause of tyranny. . . ."
> —*The Peripatetic*, iii., 109.

Likewise, when the encouragement of the French Revolution and the influence of the French philosophical doctrines had led him to conceive, beyond an enlargement of political liberty, a plan of social reform, his heart was again cruelly divided between

filial attachment to his country and mixed grief and anger at the sight of servitude and misery in England. From a height which commanded a prospect of London, as he was one day beholding the solemnity of the scene, he called to question the rightfulness, on moral grounds, of the accumulated "grandeur, opulence and power" which he witnessed. He could not repress the voice within himself, claiming for "humanity, equal justice, and general happiness." Such ought to be the boasts of the nation. "It is treason against the majesty of the people, blasphemy against the sacred names of humanity and common sense, to talk of anything as a national advantage, by which the people at large are not benefited. (*The Peripatetic*, i., 172.)

Until two conditions obtained, there could be no general happiness, and these were: the establishment of a good government and the prevalence of virtue.

With regard to the realisation of these necessary preliminaries, Thelwall trusted—in theory (theory with him was very different from practice)—the doctrine of social "mechanicalism." Let all abuses and oppressions, all inequalities, all privileges of authority and of property be swamped out, let reason prevail and a rational scheme of mutual intercourse between men be drafted, not only will old evils be destroyed, but the recurrence of any social evil for ever be precluded. While taking notes for his lectures on Roman history (which were delivered, but never published), Thelwall jotted down: "First Romans, dissolute refuse of society (banditti, runaway slaves). Chose a good government: virtue the

consequence. Institutions and circumstances of society produce virtue or vices. Liberty and good laws make good men." (MSS., iv.)

We see here at work a mode of reasoning essentially characteristic of eighteenth century revolutionary thought. A superficial knowledge of history—as in other cases a superficial knowledge of science—and hasty inferences from cursory observations served the purpose of the "philosophers," and justified in their own eyes their claims for a reform of society. We to-day easily see through the jejuneness of their information. But it would be unfair to judge the men of those days by our own standard of scientific preciseness and caution. Our generation has grown wiser mostly from the experience consequent on their delusions. Nor are we distressed by the same sufferings or goaded by the same pressing necessities. The grosser abuses have been redressed, the most ardent aspirations have been satisfied. We can investigate the facts of history or of science at leisure, composedly meditate, test and experiment, patiently wait till time confirms or invalidates hypotheses. They at a momentous crisis of history, pioneers of new modes of thought, makers of new forms of society, under pressure of keen wants and of impatient longings, hastily brought all the intellectual forces they could muster to bear on the one matter which engrossed their minds: political and social reform. Their efforts were often misapplied; but their aim was noble. Our duty is to probe their methods, while we must not forget for what invaluable possession we

are indebted to them: the ideal of individual liberty and of collective right.

In Thelwall's mind, "good government" and "virtue" were inseverably linked to and dependent upon each other. As it would plainly have been a hopeless attempt in England straightway to assail existing institutions with a view to establishing "good government," and as, besides, this method would have entailed violence, for which the English "philosophers," and the English Reformers as well, showed decided disinclination,[1] Thelwall laid greater stress upon the teaching of "virtue," which appealed to men's hearts, and did not at the outset meet insuperable resistance. He advocated the cause of virtue with the impassioned zeal of an apostle.

We have already pointed out how high he set rural simplicity and frugality; this was an important article of his creed. He, and most contemporary "philosophers," who could not foresee what extension industry was to take, and what wealth the progress of commercial enterprise was to create, did not view the social problem as an organisation of production, a regulation of the conditions of work, and a fair distribution of the yieldings of united labour, capital and talent. They chiefly aimed at reducing the excessive consumption of luxuries by the few, in order to increase the share of necessaries for the many. Social reform, then, in the eyes of Thelwall,

[1] Godwin, on principle, Horne Tooke and Thomas Paine from traditional prudence, were averse to any sort of violence. *Vide* our "French Revolution and English Poets," Book I., chaps. i. and ii.

was to be effected by means of thrift and restraint, and by setting to the favoured of fortune the example of stoic sages, ancient republicans, sturdy Swiss mountaineers, and the vaguely styled "men of nature." Witnessing the selfishness of the rich of his time, the shamelessness of aristocratic vices and of parliamentary corruption, the disproportion of fortune between the higher and the lower grades of society, Thelwall was haunted by the thought that his country did not so much need prosperity and wealth as humane feelings, righteousness of purpose, singleness of heart, or, in one word, "virtue." This was why he admired the beginnings of ancient Rome, where, along with "love of liberty" and "contempt of death," "respect for virtuous poverty" had nurtured the race that conquered the world. (MSS., iv.) This was why he took every opportunity for inveighing against riches, and for extolling simplicity. "For the alleviation of the dire calamity of distress," he wrote, "let us labour to abolish luxury; and every man may do much towards this reformation. Let us in our own houses, at our own tables, by our exhortations to our friends, by our admonitions to our enemies, persuade mankind to discard these tinsel ornaments and ridiculous superfluities which enfeeble our minds and entail voluptuous diseases on the affluent; while diseases of a still more calamitous description overwhelm the oppressed orders of society from the scarcity resulting from that extravagance." (*The Tribune*, i., 13.)

Commerce was, to say the least, a doubtful good. It afforded, it is true, a potent stimulus to human initiative and, above all, favoured the progress of science,

that invaluable boon which counterbalanced the evils of corrupt civilisation. But at what cost was this advantage gained!

> "Tis thine, too, Commerce, thro' thy native land
> To pour, wide-wasting, like a deluge, round
> The poison'd stream of Luxury, rank-polluted,
> The monster-breeding Nile of hideous vice,
> From whose oft-stagnant pools incessant spring
> A loath'd misshapen swarm, which Nature's eye
> Turns haggard to behold.
> Thou, Commerce, too, monopolising fiend,
> Fatten'st a few upon the toils of all. . . ."
>
> —*The Peripatetic*, i., 39.

The same reasons for which he condemned commerce could not but make him suspiciously view the rapid growth of factories, and the transformation of England from an agricultural to an industrial nation. He was foremost in raising a vehement protest, on the score of humanity, against the crushing conditions of labour which, at this early stage of English industry, were generally imposed not only upon men but upon women and children. With mixed sorrow and indignation, he saw many "peaceful dells" towered over by

> "the unwieldy pride
> Of Factory overgrown, when Opulence,
> Dispeopling the neat cottage, crowds his walls
> (Made pestilent by congregated lungs
> And lewd association) with a race
> Of infant slaves, brok'n timely to the yoke
> Of unremitting drudgery."
>
> —"On leaving Gloucestershire, Aug. 1797." *Poems chiefly Written in Retirement*, p. 137.[1]

[1] In Chap. III. of the present work, we shall more fully expound Thelwall's views on industrial labour, and show that he realised what advantages might derive from it, provided the law should protect working people.

He disapproved—in the name of "virtue"—of the public works which were being executed for the furtherance of commerce and industry. Having come across a newly built canal, in the course of his excursion on foot through Wales, he noted down in his Journal: "All the fruit are conveyed to London to be consumed by the luxury of the rich, without a compensating rise of wages for agricultural labourers. . . . Twenty-one workmen were killed in digging the tunnel, and nearly 100 persons at different times drowned in the canal since cut. . . . All sorts of wickedness—thefts, licentiousness—are practised in the tunnel." ("Pedestrian Excursion, MS.")

One may rightly smile at the *naïveté* of the last remark: the candid enthusiasm of the "men of virtue" would go to such lengths. But one must not fail to notice that in the preceding line Thelwall had implicitly given expression to a new and noble dictate of the modern consciousness: the sacredness of human existence and the inviolability of the labourer's life, which ought not to be lightly endangered for mere considerations of material profit. Thus, in spite of occasional singleness of judgment, inconsiderateness of feeling, or declamatory flights, he drew, before Wordsworth and Coleridge (who both owed him many a precious hint), and before the writers and thinkers of the nineteenth century, the outline of a new code of ethics, then thought of by few: the code of social ethics.

With regard to religion, two alternatives offered themselves to Thelwall. Either his sentimentality might incline him towards the form of rationalised

Christianity which prevailed at that time under the name of Unitarianism, or the logical bias of his mind might drive him to the extreme issue of mechanicalism: atheism. In fact, he entertained for some time a kind of philosophical faith in the Supreme Being, until the publication of *The Peripatetic* (1793), as may be seen from various passages of the book. Afterwards he must have discarded all deistic belief, since Coleridge, in the correspondence which he kept with him in 1797, was mostly intent upon refuting his infidelity. Coleridge's letters alone have been preserved. They are of the greatest import, as belonging to the period when Coleridge swerved from mechanicalism to transcendentalism, and lighting up not only the crucial crisis of the poet's life, but the approaching revival of religious feeling which was going to take place, in great part owing to the poet's influence, on the morrow of the French Revolution. Had Thelwall's letters been saved, they would only have had a secondary biographical interest, since his religious tenets did not in any way bear on his opinions or his actions as a reformer.

Although Thelwall finally turned a complete "age-of-reason" man in matters of religious belief, we have tried to show that he was at bottom of an essentially sentimental nature, and that his philosophy was permeated through and through with feeling. The French Revolution was the emotional shock which set a-work the social fervour and devotional energies lying within him. Previous to 1789, he had to some extent entertained the desire for universal happiness, which was to become one of the main forces of the

French Revolution, and he had revolved some of the ideal plans of political justice which the Constitution of the Year I was to apply. But not until he had actually felt the impulse of French enthusiasm, and witnessed what seemed to be a successful realisation of rational schemes, did his feelings and his speculations pervade his whole being, command his thoughts and sway his will. From being a "philosopher" and a poet, the French Revolution made him into a "patriot" and a reformer.

Not that he, at any moment, was tempted to act up to the French example, and to import into England the destructive as well as the constructive methods of the Revolutionists.[1] But the French Revolution was the powerful stimulus which urged him to endanger his liberty and his life in an apostolate for universal suffrage, and a juster distribution of the blessings of this world.

It seems to us a more striking and more pregnant fact that Thelwall was inflamed by the ideal of happiness and equality held up by France, than that he adopted the French views of political liberty. For the principle of universal suffrage, although it received its definite shape from the French thinkers, was but a logical consequence of the system of popular representation which had long existed in England. Judging from the trend of English politics, it does not seem preposterous to surmise that, in the last decade of the eighteenth century (had history followed its natural course), the progress of British institutions might have of itself, through

[1] We shall light up this point in the next two chapters.

gradual extensions of the franchise, brought about a wider participation of the lower orders in the government.

On the other hand, it comes more and more clearly into light, as historical and philosophical inquiries into the French Revolution are carried further, that it was the especial and original achievement of the French philosophers, and of their disciples, the French Revolutionists, to effect a momentous mental change, which from France spread over the whole civilised world, gave to the French Revolution a universal import, similar to that of the Renaissance and of the Reformation, and placed upon a new basis the conception of the destiny of man. This mighty change consisted in the transferring from the order of things spiritual to the life here below the longing for justice and for happiness, which had thus far been directed only towards the world beyond the grave.

This displacing of the ideal contained in germ "social reform," which has ever since constituted so important a feature of the collective life of nations. Thenceforth, those who pined in want, or were overtaxed by toil, were to unite in eager striving after a betterment of their condition. In course of time the beneficiaries of the privileges of rank and fortune were to awake to the feeling of social compunction, and to the sense of human fellowship, and were to devote literary genius or legislative ability to raising the lowly, assisting the needy, instructing the ignorant, protecting the weak, humanising legislation, pledging society at large to interference in favour of the helpless.

These feelings were not to prevail all at once and from the first: only after many years had elapsed could men be converted to social faith, and conceive the practical measures implied in "social ethics." But it was the French philosophers of the eighteenth century that breathed into modern life the spirit which was to strain to the utmost the intellectual and pragmatical energies of men towards the amelioration of society. These philosophers actually stated some of the legal consequences which might be drawn from their theory, and the statesmen of the French Revolution attempted to carry them into practice.[1]

The social legislation of the French Revolution was doomed to be short-lived. It was mooted and enacted in the blind fury of a dire struggle at home and abroad, before the minds were prepared for it, with a haste that is fatal to any collective doing of a people, through forcible spoliatory means which could not but foster hatred, and bring about a violent reaction. But the new social ideal, as it sustained the energies of the Revolution, in like manner moved to enthusiasm a few English thinkers and leaders of the people, who, while disclaiming the exceptionable methods of the French, yet admired the nobleness and grandeur of their religion of humanity.

This group of Englishmen formed the small party of social democrats, known in history under the

[1] On the "social legislation" of the French Revolution and its connection with the revolutionary philosophy, see A. Espinas' "La Philosophie Sociale du 18e Siècle et la Révolution," P. 1898.

name of "Reformers," of whom Thelwall was one, and may be looked upon as a fair representative.

We shall see, as we study him in the character of a "patriot" and a "reformer" in the next two chapters, that, deeply instinct as he was with the spirit of the French Revolution, he was a true-born Briton in his way of drawing a clear line between theory and practice, idealistic hopes and feasible reforms, and in qualifying his desire for innovation by respect for precedent.

CHAPTER II

THE "PATRIOT"

THE train of thoughts and feelings called up in Thelwall by the French Revolution disposed him to adopt the tenets and aspirations of the English "Reform party," which had played a rather inconspicuous part since the American troubles, but was recruiting its strength under the influence of the new hopes wafted from over the Channel on the storm gale of the Revolution. The circumstance that gave rise to its activity during the eventful period 1790-1797 was the Westminster elections of 1790.

Westminster was one of the few boroughs, in the sadly inadequate and corrupt state of representation in England, where the elections were really contested. There, the two members were not nominated by a lord or returned through the underhand influence of the Crown, but actually chosen by the majority of the voters. Therefore, the Whigs and the Tories had for some time past done their utmost to win the two seats which the borough had a right to fill. Each party had squandered enormous sums of money in the elections of 1784 and 1788, the Ministry vying with the magnates of the opposition in lavishing funds to secure the victory. Votes shamelessly bartered

for, public-houses kept permanently open at the expense of the contending parties, gangs of ruffians, armed with bludgeons, let loose to frighten, molest, or disable the electors on the opposite side; fierce struggles, numerous casualities, drunkenness, tumult and the most disgusting display of immorality—such had been the circumstances regularly attending the Westminster elections. The victory having often wavered from one side to the other, and having in every case been dearly won, the two parties agreed, in 1790, to share the spoils and each to nominate one candidate, whom they made bold to force upon the electors. The state of open war which had long prevailed was thus succeeded by a peace based upon a system of concerted bribery no less derogatory to morality and to law.

This defiance to civic probity and political justice on the part of wilful corrupters of Parliamentary institutions, who had so long had free play in England, did not this time pass unnoticed. The man who for more than ten years had striven to organise the growing democratic forces, who had fought in law-courts for fair dealing to the poor, and who was now encouraged by the French example to claim the political rights of the people, Horne Tooke resolved to offer himself as an independent candidate. Thelwall, who was an admirer of Horne Tooke, but had not had any personal acquaintance with him, fired by his noble conduct, tended him his help in the laborious canvassing about to begin. The proposal was accepted, and through the pains, fatigues, expense of energy and outlay of oratory that followed,

a friendship was formed, which on Thelwall's side was hearty and staunch to the last.[1]

This initiation into contemporary politics under the patronage of the prominent Reformer of the times, opened to Thelwall a closer view of the systematic and cynical corruption of the ruling oligarchy, brought him into contact with the people, gave him confidence in his own powers, and determined him to enter on the career of a teacher and a leader of the masses.

In 1790 it was no exceptionally bold thing in England to express sympathy for the French Revolution, and to vindicate the rightfulness of its principles. But it was not long possible to do so without danger. As early as November, 1790, Burke sounded the alarm by his "Reflexions," where, amid imprecations against the ruffianly upstarts of French politics and effusions on the ruin of courtly elegance and chivalry, he disclosed the deep significance of the events that were taking place beyond the Channel, how repugnant to English tradition were the methods of the French, and how threatening to privilege and property in all the countries of Europe were the so-called "rights of man." On the other hand, the "Reform Societies," either old ones roused from semi-torpor to fresh political activity, or new ones called into being by the contagion of French enthusiasm were not so cautious as might have seemed advisable at a time when the least constitutional change, viewed in the gruesome light of the events of France, assumed in

[1] "Autobiographical Memoir," prefixed to *Poems chiefly Written in Retirement*, 1802; xxiv., xxv.

the eyes of the ruling classes the appearance of total subversion. Far from behaving so as to preclude suspicion, these Societies, hurried along by their feelings and by over-sanguine hopes, dared the prevailing Conservative opinions by holding meetings, raising arguments in debating-halls, passing resolutions, drafting petitions, exchanging congratulatory addresses with French Jacobins and with the National Assembly. The latter imprudence was the graver, as the National Convention of France, driven to the acme of revolutionary fervour by treason at home and aggression from abroad, was soon to pledge itself by the famous decrees of the 18th November and 15th December, 1792, to give armed assistance to all people revolting against tyrannical governments, and was soon to forward a special circular to the popular Societies of the seaports of England to urge them to rebellion. How perilous it was for the Reform Societies—which never, in act, transgressed the lawful rights of British citizens—to lay themselves open to the charge of conspiracy with the "national foe" and of bribery by "foreign gold," was soon to appear in grim plainness.

As violence and spoliation were becoming rife in France, as the social character of the Revolution was unmistakably asserting itself, and its force of expansion seemed to be steadily increasing, the oracle of the "Reflexions" gained more and more credit every day. In flaming pamphlets, periodically launched forth, Burke gradually grew more aggressive towards the French Jacobins and the English Reformers, and in fine went the length of calling for measures of coercion against the friends of France in England. A panic soon

spread among the upper and middle classes—stirred by no distinct menace of actual danger, but by a sort of reflex shudder at the unusualness of the then occurrences, at the mysterious implications of the present crisis, at the utterly un-English ways of the French Revolution, and at the remote possibility of similar troubles arising in England. It was essentially, as was justly said by those who resisted the contagion, a "panic of property." Yet the most ignorant and most destitute of the wage-earners, impelled by blind national prejudice, and unable, moreover, to grasp the issues involved in the conflict, shared in the enmity of the propertied classes against the French Revolution and the English Reformers. For the street rabble, the outcry against France was a revival of the old racial hatred that had been dormant ever since the Hundred Years' War, and had been fostered by ballad-mongers and popular cartoonists. This irrational feeling was a powerful auxiliary to the hostile policy of the English oligarchy against democratic France and the promoters of democratic progress in England. The "panic-of-property men," the Government, the aristocracy and the wealthy middle-class, were opportunely helped by the ruffianly mobs that burnt down Priestley's house at Birmingham, plundered dissenting tradesmen's shops, or hanged Tom Paine in effigy.

In 1792 the Ministry entered on a policy of repression against the Reformers. The result was that the latter, whose ardent faith could only be exasperated by persecution, were incensed to bolder professions, to more inflammatory addresses, to a more systematic campaign of meetings. Violence

followed upon violence, till a veritable reign of terror prevailed in England, and only the most resolute durst incur the risks of imprisonment, transportation and even capital punishment in the defence of liberty and justice. Thelwall proved an undaunted champion of the popular cause at the severest phase of the struggle.

In May, 1792, a royal Proclamation was issued against seditious meetings and political "libels." The King called on all his "loving subjects" for help in the prevention of disaffection and the suppression of dangerous publications. In the then dispositions of the Government party, such a step was an encouragement to "Church and King" riots, and to wanton, slanderous denunciation. At the same time, an official system of spies and informers was organised throughout the land, and the Ministry, armed with new powers and confident in the support of public opinion, carried out a steady plan of frightening the landlords of public-houses and assembly-halls into refusing their rooms to Reform Societies.

The first object of Government persecution was the Debating Club of Coachmakers' Hall, to which Thelwall had belonged for years. It did not exactly bear the character of a Reform Society, but was the more exposed on this very account, as the Ministry did not wish to strike the first blow at one of the Societies constituted with the express purpose of agitating for Parliamentary Reform, which Pitt himself had moved in 1785, and which some prominent members of the Whig Party still

advocated in the House of Commons. The Coachmakers' Hall Society was one of the numerous popular clubs which had taken rise in the latter part of the eighteenth century, owing to the growing desire of the lower class for political information. It was composed of regular members, who rented the room, fixed the days of debates, and in a general way ran the business of the Society. The subjects to be discussed were advertised, and, on the appointed days, the doors were thrown open to all comers, a small entrance-fee being charged to cover part of the expenses. Thelwall, who had steadily attended the meetings and had played a conspicuous part on the Committee, had given to the debates a decidedly political character, and moved for discussion the most burning questions of the day. In April, 1792, the landlord, in consequence of the threats of "persons in authority," refused to renew his agreement with the Committee. They were compelled to remove to the King's Arms in Cornhill under the new title of "Society for Free Debate." In November of the same year the latter place was shut up, in its turn, "by the connivance of the Lord Mayor and the intimidated landlord."[1]

About the same date the Reformers were thrown into fresh alarm by a second Proclamation against seditious meetings, the calling out of the militia and the sudden assembly of Parliament. At these signs of redoubling severity in the persecution, the Committee members of the Society for Free Debate shrank from the perilous duty of withstanding the illegal pro-

[1] "Autobiographical Memoir," xxv.

ceedings of the Government. Thelwall resolved to fight the battle single-handed. He had a large bill posted up all over the metropolis, offering twenty guineas per night for the use of any room within the jurisdiction of the City of London, that the right of magisterial interference with the freedom of popular discussion might be fairly tried.[1] No such room could be procured, all tavern-keepers being deterred from accepting the proposal by the risk of losing their license. For the present, therefore, Thelwall had to give up the idea of calling meetings and, till revived by himself at the beginning of the following November, in 1793, the right of political discussion rested in abeyance.

Previous to the issuing of the November Proclamation, Thelwall had joined the Southwark Society of the Friends of the People, which had been recently founded by that veteran in the cause of Parliamentary Reform, Major Cartwright. It was not long till the new member was chosen for a delicate mission which his zeal, courage and oratorical power made him particularly fit to fulfil; he was appointed to attend a Convention of Delegates from the "Southwark Friends of the People," the "Holborn Society of the Friends of Freedom," and the "Society for Constitutional Information." Some time after, when the anniversary of the foundation of the Society was celebrated by a dinner, at which deputies of other Societies were present, it was Thelwall who drew up an address to the French

[1] "Autob. Mem.," *id.*, and "Pref. to Political Lectures" (a copy of the original bill in "Life," p. 98).

Convention adopted at the meeting.[1] It was he also who drafted and read amid a tumult of applause the report of the night's proceedings: "Proclamations are not laws! Conscious of the legality of our proceedings, we are determined to maintain our posts; and we doubt not by the firmness of our conduct, to convince the ministers that the people also have their prerogatives. . . ."[2] This took place about a week before the issuing of the second Proclamation. When the anticipated ministerial threat actually came forth, all the firm professions made by Thelwall's fellow-members in convivial fervour were soon forgotten; the Society, with many others, dissolved. Only the Constitutional and the Corresponding, composed of the firmest elements in the Reform party, stood their ground. Thelwall then joined the Corresponding.

Till he found again the means of raising before large audiences great debates on the defence and extension of the constitutional rights of Britons, he sought all occasions of making himself heard. He occasionally resorted to humorous—and none the less effective—attacks against the tyrannical ways of the Government.

About the beginning of November, 1793, he went for the first time to a debating society, held in Capel Court, which, by pledging themselves never to broach political subjects, had obtained permission, as Thelwall phrased it, "to open their mouths for other purposes than eating." The topic discussed on the night of his visit was: The comparative influence of the love of

[1] Original Document in "Life," p. 102. [2] *Id.*

life, the love of liberty, and the love of the fair sex on the actions of mankind. One of the debaters in his speech, from a confusion (as Thelwall thought) between involuntary muscular motions and voluntary actions, seemed to demonstrate that love of life was stronger than love of liberty. Thelwall immediately took the opportunity, under pretence of bringing in a physiological observation, to switch off the discussion to one of the forbidden matters he was eager to treat.

After a grave technical preamble, he came to describe a scene, witnessed (he said) by himself in a poultry-yard, which gave a striking illustration of involuntary or reflex motions. He related that a cock, a fine game-cock, whose brilliantly variegated feathers, portly strutting and gallant bearing of the head were magnificent to behold, sadly grieved the onlooker's heart by his tyrannical behaviour towards the occupants of the farm-yard. This King Chanticleer not only punished with unremitting rigour every hen or chicken that came within his sphere, but kicked them away from the seed-basket laid down for their repast, and snatched out of their very beaks the worms which they had scratched out of cover. Although, the speaker stated, there were some aristocratic prejudices hanging about himself from his education, so that he could not help looking with a considerable degree of reverence at the majestic decorations of the person of King Chanticleer, such as his ermine-spotted breast, the fine gold trappings about his neck and shoulders, and above all, "that fine ornamented thing about his head, his

crown or cockscomb, I believe you call it," however, he grew so indignant at the outrageous doings of this reduced image of a tyrant, that he laid hold of a sickle lying near and cut off his head, when, to his astonishment, he saw him for some seconds after attempt to kick in all directions, and even stretch up the stump of his neck as if making an effort to crow.

The audience, among which were not a few friends of Reform, burst into irresistible laughter at this witty ridicule of tyrannical royalty—within the terms of the Proclamation. The jest was found so good that the publisher, Daniel Isaac Eaton, printed a version of the story in a periodical entitled, "Politics for the People, or Hogwash," in allusion to Burke's contemptuous phrase: the "swinish multitude." The ministers were so impolitic as to take offence. Eaton was arrested on charge of libel, and as he could not hand in bail to the enormous amount of £2,000, he was kept in gaol three months before the trial came on. Great hilarity was produced at court when the indictment was read, as all along, to point to the scurrilous abuse supposed to be meant by the author, phrases as the following recurred: "A very fine majestic kind of animal, a game-cock . . . meaning our sovereign lord the King;" and "Now this haughty old tyrant . . . meaning our said lord the King;" and "This restless despot must always be kicking and cuffing the poor doves and pullets . . . meaning our said lord the King," etc. The jury returned a verdict of: Not guilty.[1]

[1] "Preface to Political Lectures" (1795).

In the same month of November, 1793, the resolute remnant of Reformers and friends of the French Revolution in Scotland and in England resolved to make a desperate attempt to stir public opinion in favour of a more extensive suffrage, by calling delegates of all the Scottish and English Reform Societies to a "Convention" in Edinburgh. The meeting actually took place, and daily sittings were held for a few days in the greatest order, when, without provocation at the hands of the members, magistrates, attended by police officers, broke in upon the assembly, dispersed it violently, and arrested the promoters — the Scotchmen Skirving, Muir and Palmer; and the Englishmen Gerrald and Margarot. The prisoners, all men of education and standing, talented barristers or gazetteers, were brought to trial before packed juries, without any right of challenge (as the law then was in Scotland), and were sentenced to fourteen years' transportation to Botany Bay (winter of 1794).

It was plain that the proceedings entered upon by the Government in Scotland were only the preliminaries to similar illegal measures in England. Yet nothing daunted by threat of personal danger, eager, on the contrary, to redress the wrong done to fellow-workers in the same cause, Thelwall determined to exert his utmost energies in rousing his countrymen to the detestation of the brutal policy of the Ministry. Since debates could no longer be held, he resolved to deliver lectures upon the most vital questions regarding English liberty in the present and in the future.

1794 An assembly-room was procured in Southwark, where he proceeded to carry out his plan. Night after night he gathered large audiences, not only of Reformers and members of the Societies, but of fair-minded hearers of all parties, and used such reserved language even in his strictures of the Government policy and his advocacy of Reform that the emissaries of the Ministry present in the room could never find a pretence to enter on a prosecution against him. When, encouraged by success, he hired two larger rooms, one at the Three-Kings Tavern, in the Minories, the other at 3 New Compton Street, Soho, he was informed that a party of police officers were to be concealed in an adjoining apartment whence to issue forth on the first word which, in their minds, might be deemed seditious, and to drag him to Newgate. He resisted the pressing request of his friends to protect himself under the shelter of some such topic as "Blackstone's Commentaries," or of a reading from the Bible. He chose for the opening lecture, and broadly advertised the subject: "On the Moral Tendency of a System of Spies and Informers." The police officers found no occasion for interference, and the evening passed off without mishap.[1]

Having by this time firmly established the right of lecturing, Thelwall now determined to conquer again the suppressed right of political debate. Having succeeded in persuading the owner of the Park Tavern, in the Borough, to let him his hall,

[1] "Life," p. 125 (original bill adjoined).

he had bills posted throughout London to the effect that a debate was to be held in the said hall on the question: "Which is to be considered as most destructive in its principles and conduct, the present or the American War?" The bills were torn down as fast as they were put up, and threats were indirectly conveyed to Thelwall that "if he dared hold the meeting, he should certainly be taken into custody." The landlord was next menaced with the loss of his license, but with as little result. When the meeting began, the police officers did not venture to execute the threatened measures of repression. They sought their end by making their "friends" keep up a continuous noise, that finally compelled Thelwall to adjourn the debate. He rose from the chair adjuring the audience to ignore the provocation and leave the room without disturbance. Nothing remained for the magistrate, who was waiting below, but to go off, frustrated in his expectation of a riot.

After this, a special consultation was held at the Mansion House to consider the means of overcoming Thelwall's resistance without too flagrant a breach of legality. In consequence, a direct message from the Lord Mayor was forwarded to the landlord of the Three-Kings, letting him know that a licensing day was just at hand and that, if he again suffered Thelwall to lecture in his room, he should infallibly lose his license.[1] The landlord yielded to the injunction.

Many like attempts were made, in the winter of 1794, forcibly to put an end to Thelwall's lectures

[1] "Life," pp. 133-4.

in Compton Street by means of gangs of ruffians and "Bow-Street runners," hired by Mr. Reeves' Associators,[1] with the connivance of the Corporation and the Ministry. Thelwall was saved from several personal assaults only owing to his cudgel-proof hat-crown and by the assistance of devoted friends.

Driven from one tavern hall to another, and nightly exposed to murderous aggression on his way home, he resorted to a last means: hiring on his own account a house containing both a lecture hall and his private apartments. Beaufort Buildings were found suitable for the purpose, and the room there, which could hold seven hundred people, often proved too small for the audiences that were attracted either by sympathy for his doctrine, or approval of his bold defence of constitutional rights, or admiration for his oratorical powers. Unfortunately for him, however, John Reeves, who deserved to be regarded as the most unrelenting enemy of Reform, happened to be High Steward of the Manor and Liberty of the Savoy (the district in which Beaufort Buildings stood). He caused a charge of nuisance to be presented to the Grand Jury against Thelwall. The Jury would not decide upon the matter before carefully inquiring into it, and sent a delegation to one of the lectures to form a precise opinion about what was done and said there. On the day on which the verdict was to be returned, Thelwall having announced his intention to be present at the sitting, the High Steward gathered

[1] Members of John Reeves' "Association for the Defence of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers."

a press-gang to carry off the lecturer on his coming out of court, in case the decision should be favourable to him. An influential friend of Thelwall, however, instructed the beadle and other inferior officers of the court to see to his protection, so that the criminal plan could not be put to execution. The answer of the Jury was: "On hearing and duly considering the complaints of several inhabitants of Beaufort Buildings respecting the lectures of Mr. Thelwall, the Jury are of opinion that they cannot present the meeting at the said Mr. Thelwall's lectures as a public nuisance."[1] (May, 1794.)

All attempts at silencing the obnoxious voice of the defender of popular rights were thus baffled by his presence of mind and his irrepressible energy, and by the orderly behaviour of his audiences. At this juncture the Government prepared to deal him their most cruel blow, namely, to involve him in a high treason case, in which twelve prominent leaders of the Reform movement were to be tried with a view not only to obtaining against them the penalty of transportation (as in the Scotch trials), but to getting rid of them by hanging.

The pretext which the ministers brought forward to secure their end was a second "Convention," which the Corresponding Society was about to summon as an answer to the illegal dispersion of the Edinburgh Convention, and to the treatment inflicted on its promoters.

[1] "Preface to Political Lectures," 1795, and MSS. note appended to it in Thelwall's handwriting in the British Museum copy, 12,270, cc. 24.

A great open-air meeting was held by the Corresponding on the 20th January, 1794, where was drawn up and voted upon an "Address to the People of Great Britain and Ireland" summing up the causes of complaint of the Reform party: the coalition of England with the despots of Europe, together with its consequences, war, increase of taxation, "pressing and crimping"; the inadequate representation of the people and the corruption of Parliament; the system of political persecution, in pursuance of which spies swarmed the country, and free citizens were imprisoned on the evidence of informers and eavesdroppers. They professed their reverence to the Constitution, and their wish of obtaining the redress of their wrongs by lawful means.

Another meeting was held by the Corresponding Society at the Globe Tavern on the 27th of March, 1794, for the purpose of deliberating "on the means of obtaining in a legal and constitutional way such a representation as might redress the grievances under which the people labour." The resolutions adopted were drafted by Thelwall.

Again the Corresponding Society called its members to assemble, and this time to join with the members of the Constitutional, on the 14th of April, 1794, at Chalk Farm, to discuss the opportunity of a new "Convention" of the Societies. In the course of the meeting the usual claims of Reform were proffered and voted upon, and a Committee was appointed to consider the means of preparing the designed Convention. In the course of the meeting, several rash resolutions were moved by violent, uneducated

individuals, or by provocators in the pay of the Government (as many confessed they were on giving evidence at the high treason trials), but they were strenuously opposed by the prominent speakers, among whom Thelwall proved particularly eager to remain within the bounds of moderation and legality. Convivialities followed, and political songs were sung, some indited by Thelwall, sarcastic indeed and acerb, but which under normal circumstances could hardly have been deemed seditious or revolutionary. They were emphatically referred to by the prosecution at the trial, but never quoted, although Thelwall's counsel, the great Thomas Erskine, humorously begged the court to let the jury, after so many hours of dreary proceedings, have this relief and entertainment.[1]

[1] One song, "News from Toulon, or, The Men of Gotham's Expedition," related to the capture and the loss of Toulon by the English, and in a tone of bitter pleasantry, opposed the war against a nation contending for liberty.

. . . . . .

"The burden of my song it is a wondrous transformation,
That late (by hocus-pocus sure) befell a neighbouring nation;
For while Bastilles were tumbling down, and palaces of Neroes
Behold! a swinish multitude were changed to men and heroes.

Hum! hum! hum!

"This news to Gotham late arrived, when her wise men assembled,
While pensioners were struck aghast and every placeman trembled;
'To arms!' cries each aristocrat, 'for if the tempest gathers,
They'll flay us all, and tan our hides, to furnish upper leathers.'

Hum! hum! hum!

Toasts were given over the punch and the beer, the terms of which were not always as guarded

"A mighty man and mighty fleet there sought a mighty harbour:
He came, saw, conquered; Gotham's chief, declared it 'quite the barber.'
But ah! those base-born *sans-culottes* kicked up a mighty riot,
Nor man of Gotham, Naples, Spain could sleep a night in quiet;
The panic seiz'd on man and beast, of terror all were full, sirs,
And e'en his Popeship's cows and calves were silent as his bull, sirs.
Hum! hum! hum!"

Life, Appendix XI., 445-6.

. . . . . .

Other songs described the situation of the commoners of England, and expressed the hopes stirred up by the promises of the French Revolution. Some stanzas rang with the notes of social revolt which Burns, about the same time, sounded in his Scotch ditties. In "Britain's Glory," Thelwall pointed to the injustice of indirect taxes, that bore more heavily upon the poor than on the rich.

. . .

"Now, the first thing, to prove
We're so free and happy, sirs,
And as equal as all came
From one common pappy, sirs,
There are volumes of Excise laws,
As I can inform you, sirs,
So numerous, that if burned,
All the country they would warm, sirs."

He deplored the calamity of unemployment, caused by the war and the consequent slackening of industry.

"Now the Spitalfields weavers
No longer complain, sirs,
That night and day, and day and night,
They labour might and main, sirs,

as prudence required: "May the abettors of the present war be its victims;" "May despotism be

> For faith they've bounteous leisure now
> To idle and to play, sirs,
> And as for food and raiment,
> Why, for these they've time to pray, sirs."
> —*Life, id.*, 449-50.

In the "Shearing Song," after enumerating those who wrapped themselves warm in the wool shorn from the backs of the many, he concluded:

> "But these are petty shearers all,
> And fleece a little flock,
> Behold where haughty ministers
> Fleece the old nation's stock!
>
> "But cease, ye fleecing senators,
> Your country to undo,
> Or know we British *sans-culottes*
> Hereafter may fleece you.
> For well we know, if tamely thus
> We yield our wool like drones,
> You will not only fleece our backs,
> But, Gad! you'll pick our bones.
>
> "When a-fleecing ye do go, etc.
>
> "Since then we every rank and state
> May justly fleecers call,
> And since Corruption's venal pack
> Would fleece us worse than all,
> May we Oppression's outstretched shears
> With dauntless zeal defy,
> Resolved fair Freedom's golden fleece
> To vindicate or die.
>
> "When a-fleecing they do go, etc."
> —*Life, id.*, 448-9.

trampled under the hoofs of the swinish multitude;" "To the lamp-posts of Parliament Street," etc. One was attributed to Thelwall: "God save the King—if God don't damn him, He will damn no man!" Were it proven that Thelwall was actually responsible for the toast, it was but words, uttered in a moment of passion, or in the warmth of conviviality. But they were soon to be construed into an overt act of conspiracy.

A few days after the meeting, the committee elected to take steps preparatory to the calling together of the Convention met at Beaufort Buildings. Views were exchanged as to the feasibility of the scheme: some members dwelt upon the indignities which had been heaped of late upon the popular party, and which ought to rouse them to fight it to the bitter end; others, of whom Thelwall was one, represented the inadvisability of running great risks for very doubtful results. The proposal for a Convention was finally negatived.[1]

Yet enough had been done to provide the ministers with the means of carrying out the design which they had been for some time contemplating. On the 12th of May, 1794, Thomas Hardy, the shoemaker who had founded the Corresponding Society, was put under arrest. The same day, a message was sent by the King to the House of Commons, denouncing a conspiracy of a few reprobates for the purpose of introducing into England the same system of anarchy as had so fatally prevailed in France. The message

[1] "Life," pp. 150-1.

was listened to with attention and respect: the Cabinet felt they had the support of the House and could go to any length of severity. On the 13th, Thelwall was apprehended. On the 16th, at the House of Commons, Pitt brought in a bill "to empower His Majesty to secure and detain such persons as shall be suspected of conspiring against his person and Government." Other arrests were successively proceeded with, at due intervals, in order to give the "conspirators" an opportunity of concealing themselves, which would have imparted a show of plausibility to the charges fabricated against them. But the Ministry were baulked in their wish.

Thelwall's house was searched by the "Messengers," first in his presence, as the law required; but under a slight pretext, he was violently dragged downstairs to the coach which was awaiting him, and the rest of the search was carried on out of his sight. He had not even the guarantee, which Algernon Sidney had not been refused, to seal with his own hand the bundles of papers which were to be used to support the accusation.[1] Not only political papers, but private letters, manuscripts of books intended for publication, all his library, and a valuable collection of etchings were taken away and stowed into three coaches. All this, the fruit of his labour and the purchases of ten years' savings, was lost for ever.

After the trial, in spite of repeated applications to "the Lords of His Majesty's most honourable Privy

[1] *The Tribune*, vol. i., xiv.

Council,"[1] he could recover nothing of what had been taken away by the Messengers.

The carelessness (or designed confusion) which attended the search at the houses of the several prisoners resulted in an utter medley of all the papers. The prosecution improved the circumstance to bring forward against Thelwall a charge, on which they expected to lay much stress, had not the prisoner's vigilance warded off the blow. They adduced against him, as would-be evidence of his dangerous character and criminal designs, a note in his handwriting, presumed to have been sent to an unknown correspondent, which one of the Messengers stated upon oath to have been found in the pocket of John Richter, impeached in the same case.[2] The document was alleged to be a letter actually forwarded to some "accomplice" and circulated from hand to hand as the manifesto of the plotting party.[3] In fact, it was a private ejaculation, unfinished, jotted down by Thelwall in a moment of excitement and anger, after the attempt to suppress his lectures through the interference of the Grand Jury; he had slipped it into Johnson's folio-dictionary

[1] Copies of these letters in Thelwall's handwriting are contained in vol. ii. of MSS.

[2] John Richter was one of the twelve Reformers indicted for high treason. A letter, testifying how brutally and confusedly the search was practised in his house also and stating that he had never seen, and *a fortiori* never carried with him the said note, is preserved in vol. ii. of MSS.

[3] "State Trials for High Treason, reported by a Student in the Temple," Part III., "Thelwall's Trial," L. 1794—pp. 21-22—61 *et* 106 (a copy in our possession from the library of the late James Dykes Campbell).

as a book-mark. Thus it was the secret outpouring of a passionate flight, never intended to be made public or communicated even to a friend, that the prosecution perversely retained as one of the most weighty charges against him, in preference to his numberless public utterances and published writings.

After his arrest, Thelwall was kept five days at the house of one of the King's messengers, who, by feigned politeness and sympathy, by inviting him to his own table and pretending to share his opinions, tried to entrap him into some statement which might be construed as a treasonous saying. He utterly failed, but took revenge on Thelwall's dignified and contemptous reserve by swearing in court that the prisoner had indulged at table in very unguarded conversation. On being cross-questioned by the counsel, he could not quote one specific offence.

Thelwall was then brought for examination before the Privy Council. He determined to answer none of the questions which were put to him by men whose dealings he had just cause to resent, and whose personal hatred towards him he too well knew. The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State, Dundas, showed indecorous anxiety to force him into breaking silence. Pitt, in a tone of marked animosity, several times addressed the Attorney-General, insisting upon the examination being pushed forward, exclaiming: "He does not know what is against him. . . . Here, let him see this paper. . . . Read it to him. . . . What does he say? What does he say?" Thelwall coldly answered once for all: "It is no part of the law or

constitution of this country that I should answer the questions of a Privy Council," and he looked unconcernedly at the pictures hanging round the room.[1]

The cause of Pitt's unconcealed anger was that, after hastily overlooking the papers of the presumed conspirators, his expectation to find amongst them wherewith to support the indictment had been baffled. The law required that a specific charge should be brought against the accused parties either of "having imagined the King's death, or defiled his wife, or adhered to his enemies, or levied war against him." Thelwall and his fellow-prisoners had been arrested only on a *general* charge of treasonous practices. No careful inquiry had been made into their doings previous to their commitment, and now that the case was being duly informed, no precise offence punishable with the extreme severity of the law could be imputed to them. After five months had passed, the prosecution was reduced to bring up the case unsupported by any reliable evidence. But the Ministry suffered themselves to be carried away by the panic and the anti-revolutionary feeling so far as to persevere in their purpose, and so attempt to sacrifice twelve innocent lives in defence of the political privilege of the English oligarchy.[2]

[1] *The Tribune*, vol. i., No. IV.

[2] Thelwall's account of the ministers' attitude towards him and the particulars of the high treason cases (as they appear from various concordant sources) may provide an argument in the standing contest among historians, whether Pitt yielded to the panic and the pressure of the warlike spirit in England, or whether he was operative in creating and intensifying both;

A secret Committee was appointed in the House of Commons to consider the Bill moved by Pitt on the 16th of May. In the Committee sat the staunchest supporters of the Cabinet and the most violent opponents of the popular demands, Burke, Windham (a renegade from the Whig party), Pitt and Dundas themselves, and the Lord Advocate who had conducted the Scottish trials and had expressed his wish in Parliament: that the laws of England might be assimilated to those of Scotland. In spite of the desperate efforts of the Whig party, too much weakened by the desertions of the alarmists to oppose a successful resistance, a Habeas-corpus Suspension Act was passed on the 23rd of May.

Then an Address was sent down from the Lords to the Commons expressing in strong terms their belief in, and abhorrence of, the "conspiracy," and their loyal wishes to bring to exemplary punishment the authors and abettors of such plans. "This declaration of the Legislature, pending a judicial prosecution, and founded upon *ex-parte* evidence, was grossly unjust and unconstitutional, as it must have had an obvious and powerful tendency to bias the minds of the juries who were to decide upon the fate of the persons accused, and who, agreeable to the principles of the law of England, ought to be presumed

whether his hostility to rising democracy must detract from his otherwise towering fame of statesmanship, or whether his tyrannical policy must be excused, in Lord Rosebery's words, as "representing not the coercion of a people by the Government, but the coercion of a government by the people." ("Life of Pitt,' p. 167.)

innocent till they were found and pronounced guilty after a fair and open trial." [1]

Thelwall remained imprisoned five months at the Tower and a month at Newgate.[2] For the first two weeks of his confinement at the Tower he was kept in as hard durance as the worst criminals. Ink and paper were denied him, books were not allowed to be sent to him, and besides the sentry standing at the door of his cell, two armed men were placed inside night and day. The only exercise he was permitted to take was a short walk on the lead roof of the Tower, where the heat from the reverberation of the sun was hardly bearable. After some time (perhaps when the informing magistrates had discovered the shallowness of the impeachment), much relaxation to the former severity was introduced. The deportment of the military towards him became less brutal, and the readiness with which they indulged in insults gave way to more considerate treatment.

[1] From "Memoirs of George III.," by William Belsham, L. 1795, vol. v., p. 150. Belsham was a Whig writer, disgusted by the wholesale breaches of the civil and political rights of Englishmen, but in no way partial to the democrats, as may be seen from the following quotations: "Horne Tooke . . . of obscure and nameless origin, suddenly appeared in the political world as an extravagant and erring spirit burst from its confine" (vol. v., p. 207). "Thelwall . . . a man whose general character was to the last degree contemptible, but against whom nothing was proved excepting some intemperate expressions . . ." (etc., *id.*, p. 511). Belsham corrected his judgment on Thelwall when he was better informed about him. See our "Conclusion."

[2] Details concerning his imprisonment are to be found in *The Tribune*, vol. i., No. XIV.; "Life," chaps. viii. and ix., and "State Trials," *op. cit. passim.*

Some time before the arraignment of Thomas Hardy (whose trial came first), all the prisoners were removed to Newgate, where fresh sufferings were in store for them. Thelwall was confined in the dead-hole, or charnel-house, where the corpses of such prisoners as died of diseases were placed before the burial. He used to say in later years, when under certain conditions of health: "Oh, that charnel-house smell! It is ever in my nostrils." He was deprived of the benefit of the books and papers which he had collected together and arranged in the Tower, with a view to his defence. Assurance was repeatedly given him that they would be sent in a special coach, but it was never done. Complaints were lodged by him and his fellow-prisoners to obtain at least as good accommodation as the common criminals. They received the promise from the Lord Chief-Justice that their condition should be bettered; but the only outcome of it was a call of "Mr. Sheriff Eamer" to apologise, with pretended politeness, for his not being able to give the prisoners larger breathing space.

Throughout this ordeal, Thelwall was comforted by the conviction that he was suffering for the sake of English liberty, and even though he died in the struggle, his death would further the happiness of generations to come. He showed both the tranquil fortitude and the eagerness for self-sacrifice that fill the hearts of men when they are moved to great issues. In his cell, he committed his feelings to verse — often indeed overshadowed by the

mannerism of the prevailing style, but now and again soaring above mediocrity:

"Freedom, the just inheritance of all,
Should be by all asserted: at the call
Of this eternal principle, should wake,
As at th' Archangel's trump, the slumb'ring world:
And to the glorious standard wide unfurl'd
Of soul-ennobling Truth, impatient throng:
While civic virtue chaunts the martial song,
And on their blood-stain'd thrones fell Tyrants shake.

"What are dungeons? What the gloom
Of Solitude to him who thus can turn
From Self to Sentient Nature—to the doom
Of myriads yet in embryo, who shall learn
To bless his virtues, and enjoy secure
The Liberty he toil'd for?"

"The Universal Duty." *Poems Written in Close Confinement.*

Later, addressing his little daughter, Maria, he called to mind in a retrospective review of the recent past, what pangs he had endured, what hopes he had formed, what solace he had found in the consciousness of duty and the ecstasy of self-sacrifice.

"... She hath sooth'd,
With many an infant smile, the anxious hours
Of hard captivity; what time, impell'd
By tyrannous suspicion, and the thirst
Of uncontroll'd dominion, impious men
Immur'd thy patriot sons. Oh, hapless Isle!
Once deem'd the land of Freedom, now the den
Of infamous Corruption. ...
... How oft have I heaved the sigh,
And felt the anxious wish, that yet the tongue
Disdained to utter, or the throbbing breast
To own, uncheck'd—alive to every pang

That Nature dictates ; but, not less alive
To the strong sense of duty ; to the voice
Of patriots and of martyrs, oft array'd
At dawn or even-tide, around my couch,
With presence all-inspiring, and with tongues
Awfully eloquent, that bade me think
'"Twas for Mankind I suffer'd—for the cause
For which a Hampden fought, a Sidney bled ;
For which the Gracchi perish'd, and for which
Each high exploit that, with unweary'd breath,
Fame, ever from eldest time, still trumpets forth,
Was erst achiev'd.' Ah ! visions that could rouse
Enthusiastic ardours ! ye were oft
My props, my consolations : ye could turn
My bonds to trophies, my keen wrongs to boons,
My solitude to high communion ;
Could make me laugh to scorn the threats of Power—
His mock tribunals, solemn pageantries,
And axe, already whetted in the pause
Of bloody expectation. Ah ! how oft,
Warm'd by such thoughts, has the gaunt scaffold seem'd
A car of glorious triumph, banner'd round
With wreaths and well-earned trophies. Death no more
Was hideous ; and the tyrant lost his power."

—"To Maria, October, 1797." *Poems chiefly Written in Retirement.*

The legal proceedings followed their course. "A special Commission of Oyer and Terminer, issued for the trial of the State prisoners confined in the Tower of London on a charge of high treason, was opened at the Sessions House, Clerkenwell, by the president, Lord Chief-Justice Eyre, in an elaborate charge to the Grand Jury. A true bill of indictment was found against Thomas Hardy, John Horne Tooke, John Thelwall, and nine other persons—John Holcroft,[1] one of the members, who

[1] The novelist and dramatist.

by concealment had escaped the previous tedium of confinement, voluntarily surrendering himself in court upon the occasion. On the 25th October, 1794, they were arraigned before the special Commission at the Old Bailey."[1]

The charge retained against them was finally that "of conspiring to overturn the Government and perpetrate the King's death." How could such an accusation be countenanced against men, whose acts and words, far from being covert or secret, had always been attended with openness and publicity, and who, in their most strenuous exertions for the redress of popular grievances and the reform of popular representation, had always kept and recommended peace and order? The policy of the prosecution was to merge intentionally the case of the accused into a general indictment of the popular Societies, and to hold them, the leaders—who had always opposed any revolutionary proposal—answerable with their lives for rash utterances, of which they had disapproved or of which they had even never heard. The prosecution selected from among the mass of evidence reported against the Societies, mostly (as came out at the trial) by spies in the pay of the Treasury, rash words let forth by unintelligent, brutal members of these Societies, violent resolutions moved (and generally not passed) under the sting of political persecution, correspondence not written by the accused, but addressed to them or even to the Committee on which they sat. It was, moreover, attempted, by making use of the "panic,"

[1] Belsham, *op. cit.*, v., 200.

to magnify facts insignificant in themselves, to inveigle the jury into believing that there existed a criminal compact between the English Reformers and the French Revolutionists, and that the former had plotted to introduce into England by revolutionary means, and perhaps with the aid of the French, the form of government which the National Convention had established in France.

"Gentlemen of the jury," said the Lord President, summing up Thelwall's case, "it will appear from the transactions in the years 1792 and 1793, that various acts were done, and measures taken, by these Societies in London and in populous towns in the country, to prepare the minds of the people to a revolution, and for the introduction of a republican form of government by the representation of a Convention, upon the plan of the Convention in France.

"These Societies have been circulating with great industry, first the works of Thomas Paine, afterwards the works of Joel Barlow. . . . In due time these Societies, in London in particular, invite the other Societies in the country to join them in appointing a mode of carrying on an intercourse with France. . . . Every man alive, I think, must be convinced of the hazard of such proceedings. The first was an address to the Society, called "The Jacobins," in France, while there was a king upon the throne in that country: now, for what good purpose could this be intended, I am unable to discover. They afterwards presented an address to the National Convention of France. . . . An account has been given

you of the language which Frost[1] used at the bar of the National Convention of France and of the language which the President used in return; from which it is manifest the address was considered as an address of republicans, and had the aspect of a work intended to prepare the way to a revolution in this country; and a hope is expressed that the time is not far off when they shall have to felicitate a National Convention in England. . . .

"Gentlemen, in point of fact, the French principles which governed the Revolution, and which proceeded to the length of bringing their king to the scaffold, were also adopted in the London Corresponding Society in the course of the year 1793, which appears from the entries in their books, for you find they make Roland, Barrère and St. André honorary members; and this, in the moment when one of them had just been speaking in the Convention of France on the trial of the king and arguing against the inviolability of the king, another taking pains to show that the right of calling a National Convention was inherent in every country in the world, and that such a Convention was capable of superseding all forms of government. These speeches are taken from *The Moniteur* and entered in the Society. They are never published, it is true, yet all the mischief of publishing them is done, for, by this notice of them, they excited the public curiosity. Now, the public know, if they turn to the books and proceedings of this Society, where they may find

[1] The delegate (together with Barlow) of the Corresponding to the National Convention of France.

a doctrine that there is no inviolability in the king. . . .

"Gentlemen, you have heard the proceedings of the Scotch Convention. On the part of the prosecution they insist that, from the strain of that meeting, from the delay of its proceedings, from the assumption of power they manifested, from the functions they affected to exercise, from the appearance they made altogether in a body in the course of the fourteen days they sat (until they were dispersed by authority), that the whole of that Convention was a plan to supersede the Parliament. . . .

"Gentlemen, they say on the part of the prosecution, that the Reform of Parliament, which has been alleged in the defence of all who have hitherto come before us under this prosecution, is a mere colour to the case, and that although there is some evidence of that, it bears no proportion to the evidence on the other side. They say also that the very Convention which met took pains to exclude any idea of an intention to petition Parliament; that at first a claim is made in favour of universal suffrage and annual Parliaments, and when that comes to be a subject of debate, they put it by and talk of the Rights of Man. . . .

"Gentlemen, no doubt when the public saw, and those who have care of the Government saw, a meeting of this nature, an assembly with so much form and organisation taking upon itself so much form and ceremony; when they saw them describe their proceedings, dating them on the 10th day of the first year of the British Convention, and opening and

closing each day in form, and with the solemnity of a prayer, and in their acts imitating in every part the proceedings of the Convention in France, it must have become a subject of serious attention, and it certainly did call for the particular attention of the Government. . . . As soon as this was dispersed, another Convention was meditated in England, and the Corresponding Society began to assume a higher tone and to use more violent language than they had been used to assume, to prepare the way for a Convention. Great pains were taken about this time to sow seditious seeds among the people, and—they say on the part of the prosecution, certainly not without colour—to induce them to commit overt acts of high treason, and the most heinous of them, that of compassing the death of the King. . . ."[1]

Viewed calmly, in the light of the political contests which we observe nowadays in countries where democracy is at some stage of development, and particularly in the light of English history in the past one hundred and fifty years, this agitation for Reform appears to be nothing more than a phase of the normal progress of the country. In matters of home politics, in 1794 England had reached the age of discretion. She, who had taught the thinkers of modern Europe the working of the institutions of liberty, had also instructed the better educated portion of her lower orders in the ways of liberty. Under the influence of the French principles, and by the contagion of the French example,

[1] "State Trials," *op. cit.*, Part III., "Thelwall s Trial," pp. 95-98.

the virtual energies of Reform, which were, some day or other, to burst forth of their own accord, were suddenly brought into play; but it is not likely that they would have deviated into a violent onslaught against the existing order. England was on the eve of a necessary political and social change, and the very behaviour of the Reform party, even under the provocation of harsh, arbitrary coercion, is a warrant that the change might have been accomplished gradually, by legal stages and peaceful means. Had William Pitt and the ruling classes kept sufficient presence of mind to realise the difference between the situation of France and that of England, and to resist the panic; had they grasped the meaning of the present restlessness of the non-electors and, practising the best advised form of self-interest, willingly granted moderate advantages to the people, England might have stayed out of the coalition, and spared herself the sufferings and expense of the war; she might have refrained from the retrograde policy of the first three decades of the nineteenth century, and spared herself the violence of the renewed advance of democracy in the thirties. France, assailed by less powerful foreign foes, whom her heroic volunteers had already routed, before England's intervention, might have resisted the inroad of the European powers, and have had a fair chance of bringing to the test of experience and amending from expediency her republican constitution; she might have been spared the ordeal of Napoleonic imperialism and the sowing of hatred in the hearts of foreign nations.

Idle suppositions! The determinism of historical forces would have it that the energies of democracy, in France, swerved from a noble striving after liberty towards a predatory struggle for territory, and, in England, were temporarily smothered by the combined efforts of party-spirit and race-hatred. The law of social evolution willed that, in the latter country, the new political and social ideal, proclaimed by the French Revolution, and in the name of which the English democrats contended for an extension of the franchise, should rouse first apprehension, then obstinate resistance on the part of the English oligarchy.

It rests upon us, while inquiring into Thelwall's part in the events of that time, to examine the charges produced against him and to decide whether he must be regarded as a perverse disturber of order for whom the gallows were a fit retribution, or as a sufferer in the cause of political and social progress, who well deserved of English democracy.

Let it be observed at the outset that, though it was arranged that a special trial would be held for each of the accused, none of them could be charged with any particular offence, but all were comprehended in a general indictment of conspiracy against the peace of the State. Thelwall's trial came after those of Thomas Hardy and of Horne Tooke.[1] Some charges brought forward in the first two trials had been supported by so contemptible evidence, that the prosecution dropped them in the case of the third culprit, daring not to call again to the witness-box the

[1] Both had been acquitted.

hirelings whose character had been twice too plainly exposed. It thus appeared that it was not at twelve convicted felons that the severity of the law was aimed, but that the Ministry, in their hatred and fear of the Reform party, pursued against its leaders a set policy of terror, to frighten the rest into quiet and silence. The flagrant injustice and cruelty of such a design was probably, in part, the cause of its failure: the juries would not take a share in the bloodshed.

That the English Reformers were warmed into enthusiasm by the contagion of the French example, is made plain by the sudden enlargement of the Reform movement after 1790, and by the very professions of the Reformers in their speeches, addresses and resolutions. But could it be inferred therefrom that they contemplated raising in their own country a revolution similar to that of France?

The addresses of the Reform Societies to the French Jacobins or to the National Assembly might, it is true, have been deemed excessive demonstrations of sympathy, or over-sanguine expressions of chimerical hopes; they betokened sentimental and imaginative ebulliency, which had seethed out in meetings where the minds were heated with collective fervour. Frost, when drafting the address to the National Convention of France, had so far given vent to his approbation of Thomas Paine's tenets as to write: "Frenchmen are free, and Britons are preparing to be so. . . . We feel ourselves inwardly torn by, and the ever victims of, an all-consuming aristocracy, hitherto the bane of every nation under the sun. Wisely have you done in expelling it from

France. . . ." Resolutions had been passed in indignation and anger after the Scotch trials, which might be represented as inflammatory in tone, when not interpreted in the light of the circumstances. The most daring one had been voted at a meeting of the Constitutional, on 17th January, 1794: "Resolved, that law ceases to be an object of obedience when it becomes an instrument of oppression. Resolved, that injustice in Scotland is injustice in England, and that the safety of Englishmen is endangered whenever their brethren of Scotland, for a conduct which entitles them to the approbation of all wise and the support of all brave men, are sentenced to Botany Bay, a punishment hitherto inflicted only on felons. Resolved, that we see with regret, but see without fear, that the period is fast approaching when the liberties of Britons must depend, not upon reason, to which they have long applied, not in their power of expressing it, but in their firm and undaunted resolution to oppose tyranny by the same means by which it is exercised."[1]

To form a just estimate of the real import of this seemingly revolutionary manifesto, we must read it alongside with an "Address to the People of Great Britain and Ireland," drafted in the same spirit, but with fuller expression of the actual intent of the Reform party, at the Globe Tavern meeting of the Corresponding a few days later, on 20th January, 1794: "Citizens . . . we certainly do find that our ancestors did establish wise and wholesome laws; but we as certainly find that, of the venerable

[1] "Thomas Hardy's Trial," *op. cit.*, p. 258.

Constitution of our ancestors, hardly a vestige remains. . . . We must have redress from our own laws, and not from the laws of our plunderers, enemies and oppressors. There is no redress for a nation circumstanced as we are, but in a fair, free and full Representation of the People." [2]

We can see from this document—whose purport is confirmed by the general tenor of the Reformers' utterances and by the moderation of their acts—how different the situation in England was from that in France, and how unjustified the pretension to assimilate the Reform movement with the French Revolution. Far from disowning the past, the English Reformers rested their present claims on the age-long civil liberties which had been the boast of England ever since Magna Charta. The lower classes, indeed, they asserted, ought no longer to be excluded from the dignity of freedom and the advantages of citizenship. This step, they knew, meant the cancelling of the political privilege of the oligarchy. But they were conscious that, by this contention, they did not break up national traditions or transgress the laws of the country. They claimed the right of appropriating and using, in behalf of popular interests, the eloquent words which Burke had uttered of late in defence of the spirit of the Constitution: "The virtues, spirit and essence of the House of Commons," he had said, "consists in its being the express image of the feelings of the nation. . . . It would (among public misfortunes) be an evil more natural and tolerable that the

[1] "Thomas Hardy's Trial," *op. cit.*, pp. 265-6.

House of Commons should be infected with every epidemical frenzy of the people, as this would indicate some sanguinity, some sympathy of nature with their constituents, than that they should in all cases be wholly untouched by the opinions and feelings of the people out of doors. By this want of sympathy they would cease to be an House of Commons."[1] They claimed the right of pressing, by means which public opinion in England had for more than half a century been legally possessed of, the vote of an extension of the franchise. The forwarding of addresses to the French Assembly and the referring to wide-reaching principles meant that they entertained complete sympathy for the democratic strivings of the French, and were stimulated by their bold proclamation of the universal rights of all men. But at the same time they trusted that, owing to the advance of England beyond other nations, they could attain the same end by wholly different means.

The measure advocated by the Reformers, which was construed by their enemies into covert means of overturning the Government, was nothing but the duplicate of a plan of Universal Suffrage and Annual Parliaments advocated in 1782 by the Duke of Richmond. There was this degree of similarity between the two schemes that the Duke had proposed to have delegates of the people elected by Assemblies in order to meet in a Convention, and had entered into a correspondence with a colonel of the 45th Volunteer Corps of Ireland,

[1] Burke's "Present Discontents."

respecting this point.[1] Furthermore, when William Pitt himself—with whom the present high treason affair had originated—had designed, ten years before, to move a Bill of Parliamentary Reform in the House of Commons, he had thought fit to stir public opinion in favour of his proposal by the same means as those resorted to by the Reformers. Nothing was more piquant, on Horne Tooke's trial, than seeing the Right Hon. William Pitt come to the bar and be asked by the prisoner, in his cool, lashing tone, whether or no he had been present, with the prisoner himself, at a meeting at the Thatched House Tavern in 1780, which was a "Convention" of delegates from great towns and counties of England, appointed by committees of those towns and counties, with the object of animating the people to meet in districts and petition Parliament for a reform. Pitt awkwardly responded to his shrewd questioner that "he had no distinct recollection of the composition of the meeting."[2]

An attempt on the part of the prosecution to prove that an armed rebellion had been contemplated by the Societies miserably failed. The counsel for the Crown tried to make much of a letter, addressed to Hardy by the Sheffield Branch of the Constitutional, to propose to him "an improved pattern of pike-blade that might be fixed to any sort of shaft. . . ."[3] From the examination of several witnesses, one of

[1] "Hardy's Trial," *op. cit.*, "Evidence of His Grace the Duke of Richmond," pp. 210-11, and "Erskine's Speech," pp. 175-7.

[2] "H. Tooke's Trial,' *op. cit.*, pp. 87-88.

[3] "Hardy's Trial," *op. cit.*, p. 102.

whom confessed being a Government spy, it came out that half-a-dozen pikes had been made by two or three members of the said Society, not for criminal use in a conspiracy, but for defence against the rioters of the Church and King party, who had boasted to make the *sans-culottes* rue it. The loyal tumult-mongers had indeed gone so far as "to surround the house which they called the Jacobin House, on account of the club's holding its meetings there, and menace to pull it down and burn it. They had also paraded the streets with arms, and fired into several houses."[1] These acts of violence could not be taken as mere idle demonstrations, as affrays, often attended with house-burning or blood-spilling, had been repeatedly raised in large towns by the supporters of the Ministry.

A witness (who acknowledged being employed by "a person high in office" for the purpose of procuring information), deposed that at the dinner which followed the Chalk Farm meeting, he had seen in the hands of many people a knife of a special description, which resembled what the French called *couteau secret*, opening with a spring, and not apt to fly back. A cutler who dealt in those knives, having then been sworn, declared, in answer to Erskine's questions, that "he had sold that description of knives for more than seven years, had always put them in his window for common sale, and had never known a cutler without them."[2]

[1] "Hardy's Trial, Evidence of the Witnesses for the Prosecution," p. 120.

[2] *Id.*, "Evidence for the Prosecution," pp. 134-149.

Apart from these charges, that fell short of impressing the jury from the very grossness of their untruth, the general policy of the prosecution was to represent the movement for Parliamentary Reform as a mere pretence to hide actual preparations for a Revolution. They laid the greatest stress on the proposed "Convention" and on its rather childish imitations of the phraseology and forms of the French Convention. Yet, judged sanely from a distance, out of reach of the passions and fears that distorted real facts, this summoning of delegates appears as nothing more dangerous than, in our days, some Congress of Trades' Unions in England, or of Socialists in France. In this light it was regarded by W. Belsham, who, among contemporary authors, stood aloof, alike from retrograde stubbornness and from innovating sanguineness, and who, if not very leniently disposed towards the Reformers, at any rate interpreted the events of his time according to the sound traditions of English history. Of the designed Convention, Belsham wrote: "The legality of such a delegation as that in contemplation had never been questioned; on the contrary, it was justified by recent precedents both in England and Ireland. But to dream of opposing the authority of this conventional committee, without arms, without money, without the support of any persons more eminent than Thomas Hardy, shoemaker, John Thelwall, itinerant lecturer, Thomas Holcroft, comedian, etc., was the extremity, not of political criminality merely, but of folly and even of madness."[1]

[1] *Op. cit.*, vol. v., p. 205.

Thelwall first intended to speak in his own defence. For this purpose he had collected a great many quotations from the proceedings of previous State trials and from the most famous commentaries on the law of England, and had written down disconnected notes [1] setting forth the main points of his doctrine, to be used in his address to the jury. He finally gave up this design,[2] probably at Erskine's instance, as we may conjecture from an incident which occurred at the trial. Thelwall, at one moment, anxious to express the feelings that he felt bubbling within him, sent up a slip of paper to his counsel to let him know that he wished to address the jury himself. Erskine wrote back in answer: "If you do, you'll be hanged;" upon which Thelwall replied: "Then I'll be hanged if I do." Fortunate it was for the vehement, voluble propagandist, ready of passion and ready of speech, in the heat of indignation and under the strain of six months' imprisonment, that he could be persuaded to yield to the advice of prudence. Any open profession of democratic opinions—as he could hardly have refrained from—would have been fatal to his cause; whereas if due apology was tended by a dexterous counsel for the occasional starts of an essentially honest, law-abiding man, carried away by the very sincerity of his faith, the jury might be made alive to the gross violation on the part of the Government of the fundamental liberties of Englishmen. Erskine,

[1] Which form vols. i. and ii. of the MSS. in our possession.

[2] The materials collected were shaped later into the pamphlet entitled: "The Natural and Constitutional Rights of Britons, an Address intended to have been delivered at the Bar of the Old Bailey" (1795).

ably assisted by Gibbs as second counsel, succeeded both in allaying the suspicions and in rousing the self-dignity and sense of justice of the jurymen.[1]

They returned a verdict of: Not guilty. As it was the third acquittal pronounced in the course of these proceedings, or, as might be said, the third rebuff inflicted on the Government by the common-sense of the people, momentarily freed from the blinding passions of the panic, the prosecution gave up the indictment against the rest of the accused.

When Thelwall and his defenders came out of court, there broke out from the crowd gathered in the neighbourhood of the Old Bailey an immense shout of applause as had already greeted Hardy and Horne Tooke after their acquittal. The horses were taken from the carriage that was waiting, and men of the people took their place. The multitude did not disperse from under the windows of Thelwall's brother-in-law's house, whither he had asked to be drawn, till he had addressed them.

These ovations to the intended victims of the high treason trials were the only occasions when popular demonstrations took place, or were suffered by "loyal subjects" to take place, in favour of the friends of Reform and of the French Revolution. The iniquity of the purposed chastisement and the tragic predicament of the defendants seem to have disposed part of the populace to sympathise with the democrats

[1] His speech in Thelwall's defence has not been preserved in "The Speeches of the Hon. Thomas Erskine," four vols., L. 1810 (reprinted in two vols. in 1870). It is only to be found (abridged) in "State Trials," *op. cit.*

or, at any rate, to let their supporters publicly cheer them unmolested. This attitude was neither to disarm the Ministry nor to last long, as we shall now relate.

Such strain as the leading Reformers had borne, such sufferings as they had undergone, such dangers as they had incurred, were indeed fit to cause the essential features of the character of each to come into prominence. That such was the case, clearly appeared from the very different behaviour of Horne Tooke and of Thelwall, after the trials. Horne Tooke, who had made so determined a stand during the ordeal of the proceedings in court, and, by his presence of mind and keen sarcasm, had so largely contributed to throw ridicule and odium on the prosecutors, whether exhausted by this effort, or finding the struggle too hard for him, manifested his intention of withdrawing from the political arena. Yet, unwilling to see another assume the leadership which he deserted in so critical an emergency, and thus emphasise his dereliction of a post of danger, he urged Thelwall, "his political son," to follow his example. As the latter energetically refused, Horne Tooke, with a rancour of feeling which he had never evinced before in his public or private conduct, began not only to show coolness to Thelwall, but to speak slightingly of him to people of high credit in society, whose acquaintance had been the reward of his abandonment of the popular cause. Thelwall was deeply grieved —still more deeply injured, for Horne Tooke's disparagement did much towards raising the hue and

cry against him, which made it so hard for him, two years later, to find a place of retirement and the means of earning a livelihood; but he never uttered an evil word against his former friend.

With the sincerity of purpose, buoyancy of enthusiasm, and eagerness of proselytism which had previously marked his political career, he resolved, in the same peaceful spirit, but with the same unflagging pertinacity, to resume his exertions in behalf of the lower orders of society. After the recent troubles which, in spite of sufferings endured and hazards run, had been after all unprofitable to the popular party, he thought he could best attain his end, no longer by stirring up popular meetings in favour of Parliamentary Reform, but especially now by disseminating in philosophical lectures the principles of political justice. While not giving up all attempts to rouse the masses to the sense of their just grievances, he meant especially now to awake the most liberal-minded of the privileged classes to the consciousness of their duties. Realising that he was shut out from any means of directly benefiting the many, as a popular leader, he made up his mind to serve indirectly their interests as an inquirer into, and a philosophical animadverter on, matters of general politics. He was satisfied that the best thing he could do now was to lay the foundation of distant future progress, since the resistance of the retrograde party and the inertness of the greater part of the people shattered all present hope of carrying Parliamentary Reform.

Nor was the news from the other side of the

Channel so encouraging as of late for the Reformers, whose confidence in the applicability of a rational ideal had arisen in great part from the triumph of philosophical doctrines in France. Thelwall, indeed, as we know him, an enthusiast and a self-dedicated apostle of the new religion of humanity, was not the man to despair, at the first discomforting signs, of the cause of universal justice and happiness, however closely linked it seemed to the vicissitudes of the French Revolution: men of much keener insight than he kept their trust in revolutionary France as late as the *Coup d'état* of the 18th Brumaire. He did not despair, but he had cause to apprehend new delays in the realisation of a state of greater political and social perfection in Europe.

In the winter of 1794-95, the English friends of France, hardly recovering from the anguish of Robespierre's bloody sway, saw, not without misgiving, dark portents mustering on the horizon of the French Revolution: fresh differences, renewed conflicts, the widening gap between the moderates and the extremists, the weariness of the nation at large, resigning their fate into the hands of a political junto, the dangerously increasing prestige of the army which seemed now to embody the spirit of the Revolution—all these signs threw a sombre hue over the future. Thelwall, by reason of his very eagerness for social Reform, could not fail to notice the anti-equalitarian spirit which was gaining ground among the *Conventionels*, and the debates on the restriction of the franchise and the safeguards of property, which were soon to result in the restoration of class

privileges by the Constitution of the Year III. Whilst the French middle class, on whose devotion to justice and subservience to principle he had so much relied, were thus preparing to monopolise for themselves the fruits of the Revolution, he could no longer look forward to the near conversion of the English ruling oligarchy to social disinterestedness. Yet in spite of all, he preserved unabated confidence in the slow action of reason and in the ultimate triumph of universal benevolence. He resolved to devote his efforts to further the remote advent of political and social truth.

He went to considerable expense in fitting up his lecture-room in Beaufort Buildings, issued advertisements, and inaugurated a course of political lectures on the 6th of February, 1795, by a dissertation "Upon the Moral and Political Importance of the Liberty of Speech." Twice a week he went on delivering lectures, to which he devoted long and arduous preparation, not only pondering on the substance and sequence of the thoughts, but gathering quotations, collecting historical illustrations, occasionally sketching the outline of a rhetorical figure, elaborate simile, personified abstraction, apostrophe or prosopopœia according to the taste of the time.[1] He then spoke extempore, using only a few notes, trusting the inspiration of the moment and his talent of oratory—acknowledged even by his enemies—to give the thoughts full development, and to touch them to life by a noble sweep of phrase, warmth of passion and

[1] Two (out of the five) vols. of MSS., which we now own, are made up of outlines of lectures, many of which were not published.

imaginative colouring. The "philosophy" was not his: it consisted in the general principles set forth by the theorists of the French Revolution, to which, however, as we shall show in the next chapter, he gave a personal and national stamp, and from which he derived applications well worth examining. The historical illustrations, as we have already pointed out, not unusually evinced superficiality of knowledge and abuse of generalisation. What gave the lectures their pith, pathos, originality, and hold upon the audiences that crowded within the room were their glowing style, their effective rhetoric, their poetical flights, and the peculiar strength which the speaker imparted to them by his exceptional powers of delivery—the same that were to enable him, after political lecturing had become impossible, to start as an elocutionist and teacher of the art of public speaking. We may judge of the popularity of his lectures, and of the encouragement which he found in their success, from a letter to his wife, instinct with the fervour of the contact with the public. "Two nights I have had nearly six hundred persons, and mostly from four to five hundred. Two lectures in particular, Wednesday, 9th, and Wednesday, 16th, have shaken the pillars of corruption till every stone of the rotten edifice trembled. Every sentence darted from breast to breast with electric contagion, and the very aristocrats themselves—numbers of whom throng to hear me—were frequently compelled by irresistible impulse to join in the acclamations, however they disliked the doctrine."[1]

[1] "Life," p. 367.

He engaged a shorthand writer to take the lectures down with a view to publication. Some of them actually came out in a periodical, *The Tribune*, which he started for the purpose, and of which he remained editor and sole contributor from the 14th of March, 1795, to the 25th of April, 1796, till it was suppressed by authority. The twenty-four pages issued weekly consisted of excerpts from his lectures, reprints of poems, and accounts of his imprisonment and of the proceedings of the high treason trials.

Thelwall was brought to resume the part of an active leader at the end of 1795, under pressure of new and momentous circumstances.

About that time, the populace of the East End of London, that had thus far shown stolid indifference to political interests, or, when roused at all, had joined in anti-Reform, anti-Dissent and anti-French riots, began severely to feel the evil consequences of the war. Commerce had undergone a depression owing to the dangers attending navigation and the increased rates of freight and insurance; industry had declined; there had ensued a falling off in employment and a lowering of the wage-standard. At the same time, the price of the necessaries had considerably risen on account of heavier taxation, reduced imports, large supplies sent abroad to the army, and a series of bad harvests superadded to all. The misery of the wage-earners had reached such a pitch that disorders had broken out all over the country from mere excess of suffering. Two means offered themselves to the Ministry of putting an end to the present unrest: either to allay the public evils

by checking corruption, redressing abuses, making overtures for peace, and granting the demands for Parliamentary Reform; or to silence forcibly the cries of the malcontents, and to awe the starving into quiet. Which course was the Administration to pursue?

The last harvest had been plentiful and the poor were recovering hope, but the price of corn kept rising. Want was embittered by disappointment. The situation was drawing to a crisis, just at the opening of the autumn session of Parliament.

The moment seemed favourable, if ever, for the Reform party to make a last attempt to obtain peace with France and an extension of the suffrage. The London Corresponding Society, which had had but a nominal existence since the arrests of 1794, once more assumed its old spirit and called on Thelwall to take its lead. The latter, firm in the line of conduct which he had set to himself, declined the proposal, and from June, 1795, when the Society entered into activity again, to October of the same year, refused to take any share in the committee work which went steadily on. Three days before the assembling of Parliament, on the 26th of October, a great meeting was called together by the Corresponding Society in Copenhagen fields, to petition the King on the subject of war and to offer an address to the nation. Thelwall had not urged it and had been an absolute stranger to the preliminary arrangements. It was no consideration of personal safety that weighed upon his mind; but he felt that the circumstances had very much altered from what they were in 1794. Not

hundreds now, but thousands, would answer the summons; the regular members of the Societies, trained to discussion and amenable to counsel, who had thus far formed the attendance at meetings, would be mixed with an undisciplined crowd goaded by hunger to any sort of misdoing. Yet when the appointed day came, Thelwall considered it his duty not to leave to anybody the task of addressing the people, trusting his power of speech to persuade the audience, while firmly asserting their rights, to keep within the bounds of legality and peace.

The day passed off without the least breach of order, although exceedingly large numbers attended—150,000 persons, it is reported[1]—and some were in the state of excitability which broke out, three days later, into the most serious disturbances of that period. On the 29th, when the King went to open Parliament, he was received by the mob with cries of: "Down with Pitt! No war! Give us bread!" Stones were hurled at the carriage, one pane of which was broken, and the Life Guards charged to clear the obstructed way. The empty carriage, on its return to the King's Mews, was stopped, assaulted, and one of the footmen knocked down, deadly wounded.

However disinclined the Ministry had ever been to adopt a liberal policy, this attack upon George the Third drove them to fierce measures of repression. They resolved wholly to suppress the right of meeting and of speaking in public on matters of present politics. Two bills were introduced, one

[1] "Life," p. 379.

into the House of Lords by Lord Grenville, the other by Pitt into the House of Commons, "for preventing seditious meetings and writings," which, as one of their effects, were to put an end to Thelwall's lectures, and to the publication of his *Tribune*.

The bringing in of these bills created considerable emotion throughout the country. The Whigs—or rather, the remnant of the party that once stood for the liberties of the Commons of England, the "New Whigs," as Burke had contemptuously styled them — took alarm, and showed a disposition to co-operate with the Reform Societies in resisting the intended measures. It was the first time, in those troublous days, that the Liberal minority of the ruling class realised what strength they might derive from the support of the organised body of the non-electors. It was the first time that, requesting the aid of the better educated working-class, they tacitly agreed to consider their claims. A part—however small—of the oligarchy was going to strike an alliance with democracy. Thelwall fully grasped the importance of this event, and did all in his power to further the union. It seemed as if his teaching of political and social justice was beginning to bear fruit. The combination actually took place: but it came too late. The death-blow was about to be dealt at the popular Societies, and the Opposition in Parliament, unable to prevent the passing of the reactionary acts, was about to be driven to the last and desperate shift of secession. Only much later, after the storm of the Napoleonic wars had swept over Europe, could the alliance of the Liberals

and the Democrats, fruitlessly attempted by Thelwall, be effected.

An advertisement was posted about London, calling the friends of liberty to assemble again in the grounds of Copenhagen House, on the 12th of November, in spite of a Proclamation, issued four days after the assault on the King, forbidding the people so to meet under any pretext whatever. A notice was appended to the advertisement, to the effect that "a Proclamation was no law; but that, if an attempt was made to disperse the meeting by force, and anyone was taken into custody, the people should offer no resistance, suffer it patiently, and trust to a virtuous jury; for nothing could injure the cause of liberty so much as violence."[1] 200,000 people are said to have gathered together, Reformers, members of the Whig Clubs, and an immense crowd of men, women and children. Thelwall delivered several speeches from the various platforms which had been erected. The police had no occasion for interference.

Two meetings were then called by the Whigs, one at Palace Yard and the other at Hackney, in which the Duke of Norfolk and the Duke of Bedford publicly committed themselves to the defence of the rights of the people invaded by the Government. On the 7th of December, the Corresponding Society once more invited the supporters of liberty and reform to gather in Marylebone fields. Thelwall, exhausted as he was by the exertions of the last month, in which, besides addressing the meetings, he had been lecturing six times in the week, stood at his post on the

[1] "Life," p. 402.

platform. It was a painful strain for him, but he was rewarded by being able at one critical moment to prevent an affray, the consequences of which might have been disastrous. The Ministry had ordered the military to stand in the vicinity of the meeting ground ready to interfere at the first opportunity. While Thelwall was speaking, a panic was insidiously created by a cry of: "The soldiers! The soldiers!" Instantly the whole field was astir, and the irritated countenance of the people indicated that the least provocation might be fatal. Thelwall, through his presence of mind and that controlling power over the multitude which his generosity and self-devotion had gained him, broke up the gathering storm of passion, exclaiming, in a brilliant flight of eloquence: "Why fear the soldiers, my countrymen? Ministers know too well that men, on changing a brown or a black coat for a red one, cannot throw off all the ties of kindred, the love of that liberty which they heard and lisped in their infancy, the dear and bland affection for their native country. Would that all the British soldiers in the country, would all—all were here! and we, confidently, unarmed as we are, with our bosoms open, our wives and children in our hands, would meet them firm and undaunted! We should then see how the feelings of Britons would glow in their breasts, and hear the mandate of military destruction sound in vain. Oh, citizens! then indeed would be our triumph—a triumph which even now our enemies tremblingly apprehend."[1]

[1] "Life," p. 412. There ends the narrative given by (the second) Mrs. Thelwall. The announced 2nd vol. of the "Life" never came out.

This meeting was the last that could be held. On the 18th December, 1795, the two restraining Acts received the royal assent.

As a consequence of the Acts, not only did it become impossible for Thelwall to carry on his bold propaganda, but he was cut out from the scanty earnings which had been provided him by his lectures and publications. The immediate loss which he incurred was considerable. Beaufort Buildings had been rented in 1794 by a group of Liberals (some of them of considerable property and station in life), who were determined on having at least one place in London where debates could be conducted and lectures given on important political subjects—even if unpalatable to the Ministry—and who had agreed to subscribe annually to the amount of the rent, viz., £132. Thelwall had been offered the use of the house, and appointed by common consent to direct the debates and deliver the lectures. For two years he had had to bear the heavy expenses attendant on the advertising, printing, and fitting up of the assembly-room. After the passing of the Acts, the subscribers, fearing for their own safety, refused to keep their engagement, and part of the rent, with the arrears of the other expenses, fell upon Thelwall. In the spring of 1796 he had to drop *The Tribune*, which, although issued at the very low price of 3d a number of twenty-four pages, had yielded a fair profit. Awed by the provisions of the Acts respecting the sale of seditious writings, the booksellers refused to clear the remaining stock. As the periodical had been printed at the editor's own expense, he lost £400 on it. He tried to

go on publishing his views on political philosophy, without reference to the present policy of the Administration, in a series of pamphlets entitled: "The Rights of Nature." The enterprise had to be abandoned after Part II. (December, 1796).[1]

Contemplating the means of resuming a course of lectures, without exposing himself or his hearers to the rigour of the law, Thelwall thought of "Classical History" as a subject which did not fall under the interdiction of Clause XII. of the Convention Bill, "that no one should deliver discourses on or concerning any supposed public grievance, or any matters relating to the laws, government, or policy of these kingdoms." He sent out a prospectus, in the form of a pamphlet, in which he carefully weighed the terms of the Acts in order to determine within what limits an orator might still be allowed to address an audience. As these intended lectures were his only resource and his last hope of providing for his wife and child, he was anxious to dissipate all fears that might deter the public from answering his appeal. He concluded that he had a right "to discuss the principles of liberty and justice, and expose all the horrors of tyranny and usurpation," provided he refrained from allusions to the affairs of England. He therefore announced his intention to inquire into the spirit and character of Roman History, in reference to the universal ideal which he had hitherto applied to the government of his country, and brought

[1] See Prefatory Memoir to *Poems chiefly Written in Retirement*, op. cit., p. 31, and Postscript to Part II. of "Rights of Nature."

to bear upon particular plans of political and social Reform. "The only operation of the Bills," he added, "would be that the magistrates of the district would receive a little insight into the facts and principles of ancient history, without paying for their admission."[1]

The lectures actually took place.[2] Roman history was only a pretext for him to bring in the principles of political philosophy which he had devoted the last four years of his life, amid ever renewed dangers and persecutions, to vindicate in debates, set forth in lectures, proclaim in meetings, and popularise by his writings. He so strictly kept within the provisions of the Acts that he could not be prevented from delivering the lectures. But it soon appeared that by dint of threats and severities, the Ministry had finally succeeded in breaking the spirit of the Reform party and of the Opposition: hardly any dared face the perils impending on the struggle for liberty; very few had even the heart to give a passive support to the last champion of resistance. The lectures did not draw large enough audiences to enable Thelwall to bear the costly expenses of living in London.

With unflinching energy he now purposed to start on a tour through the provinces, and to lecture in towns where he might expect to meet a friendly welcome. On the advice of reliable correspondents—personal acquaintances, or members of the popular

[1] "Prospectus of a Course of Lectures, in Strict Conformity with the Restrictions of Mr. Pitt's Convention Act" (1796).

[2] They were never published. The outlines prepared by Thelwall for the delivery form vol. iv. of the MSS.

Societies—he successively repaired to Norwich, Lynn, Wisbeach, Westminster, Yarmouth, Derby and Stockport.[1] In Norwich he delivered twenty-two lectures with fairly good success. But Reeves' Associators and the affiliated members of similar "patriotic" and Conservative Clubs did not mean to let him go on in peace, advocating equal suffrage under colour of commenting on Roman politics, and claiming a human standard of life under pretence of explaining the Gracchi's agrarian laws. They needed not take great pains to rouse bitter—and often brutal—animosity against the man who stood almost alone in defence of Reform. Under the influence of alarmed patriotism and aggressive traditionalism, the provinces were in a far more dangerous state of Conservative frenzy than the metropolis. It was in country towns that Church and King riots had reached the highest degree of violence. No wonder, then, that Thelwall, coldly received everywhere, was in four towns brutally assaulted by the "defenders of order" with the connivance of the local authorities. At Yarmouth especially, "a desperate banditti of about ninety persons, habited like sailors and armed with bludgeons and cutlasses, invaded the lecture-room and continued their depredations uncontrolled for considerably more than an hour, to the great danger of the lives of all, to the actual injury of the limbs of many, and to the considerable loss of personal property. The heroes of this exploit were the crew of *H.M.*

[1] In vol. iii. of the MSS. is preserved a letter from Amelia Alderson (later Mrs. Opie), encouraging Thelwall to come to Norwich.

Frigate L'Espiegle, then lying in the harbour; "they went back to the ship loaded with spoils" (Thelwall's books and papers, and the people's shawls and great-coats.)[1] Protests tendered by Thelwall to the mayors of the towns where disturbances occurred were of no avail.[2] "An Appeal to Public Opinion against Kidnapping and Murder, including a narrative of the Late Atrocious Proceedings at Yarmouth," no more succeeded in securing to Thelwall the sympathy of the public at large or the protection of the law. Precedents now were established which might be interpreted as an encouragement to any sort of aggravated violence. Thelwall, after courageously persevering in his perilous undertaking for some time, at last, hunted down like a wild beast by his opponents, deserted by his friends who no longer dared to keep any connection with him, was obliged to cease his political exertions, which had thus far provided him with the means both of living and of fulfilling his duty in promoting political and social advance.

[1] The quotation is from Thelwall's letter of protest to "The Right Worshipful the Mayor of Great Yarmouth" (22nd August, 1796), the rough copy of which is preserved in vol. iii. of the MSS. All the details are confirmed and the name of the ship mentioned in Adolphus' "History of England under George III." (vol. vi., pp. 482-4), where the particulars are stated in full, to the (supposed) credit of the Government party.

[2] A request of Thelwall begging the Mayor of Lynn Regis to forestall an assault similar to that of Yarmouth, reported to be preparing, was not followed by any intervention of the civil power. Shameful ill-usage of the lecturer and the audience actually took place, which practically drove the former out of the town. A copy of Thelwall's request is in MSS., vol. iii.

Not unaccompanied with cruel heart-rending was this abandonment of a cause in which he had believed against all hope, and for which he had bravely battled regardless of injuries and hardships, lost opportunities, fierce insults and public odium. He expressed his but too natural sadness in verses made pathetic by the painful intensity of feeling. On the anniversary of his birth, he exclaimed :

> "Eventful day !
> How shall I greet thee now, at thy return,
> So often mark'd with sadness ! Art thou, say,
> Once more arriv'd a harbinger of woes,
> Precursor of a year of miseries,
> Of storms and persecutions, of the pangs
> Of disappointed hope and keen regrets,
> Wrung from the bosom by a sordid world
> That kindness pays with hatred, and returns
> Evil for good ?—a world most scorpion-like,
> That stings what warms it, and the ardent glow
> Of blest Benevolence too oft transmutes
> To sullen gloom and sour misanthropy,
> Wounding, with venom'd tooth, the fostering breast
> That her milk turns to gall . . .
> . . . my soul
> Is sick of public turmoil—ah ! most sick
> Of the vain effort to redeem a race
> Enslav'd, because degenerate ; lost to hope,
> Because to virtue lost—wrapp'd up in Self,
> In sordid avarice, luxurious pomp,
> And profligate intemperance—a race
> Fierce without courage ; abject, and yet proud ;
> And most licentious, tho' most far from free.
> Ah ! let me, then, far from the strifeful scenes
> Of public life (where Reason's warning voice
> Is heard no longer, and the trump of Truth,
> Who blows, but wakes the ruffian crew of Power
> To deeds of maddest anarchy and blood)
> Ah ! let me, far in some sequester'd dell,
> Build my low cot. . . ."[1]

[1] "Written at Bridgewater, in Somersetshire, on the 27th of July, 1797." *Poems chiefly Written in Retirement*, pp. 127 and 129.

The idealist, who was in him the father of the rationalist and of the reformer, alone survived. Thelwall now only longed for rest in a picturesque country, where he might find a lingering flavour of primitive innocence and some survival of "natural life," since he had so sadly experienced that "social life" was as yet incompatible with rational happiness.

At this date took place two memorable events of his life: the rupture of his relations with a man who was a conspicuous figure of eighteenth century philosophy, and the opening of his connection with a man who was to become a master of nineteenth century thought—his estrangement from Godwin and his friendship with Coleridge.

The author of "Political Justice" had exerted a great influence over him as over most of the inquisitive, novelty-seeking minds in England, who then wished to bring the results of speculative inquiry to bear upon the reform of Government and society. Godwin and Thelwall had common friends,[1] and had met several times. Thelwall entertained deep regard and sympathy for a man whom he was ready to hail his "philosophical father," as he had acknowledged

[1] Holcroft, who was Godwin's bosom friend, had been attracted towards Thelwall by similarity of political opinions and of literary pursuits, and by community of fate (in the State trials). An affectionate letter of Holcroft's to Thelwall, while the latter was in the Tower, is to be found in MSS., vol. ii. Joseph Gerrald, a victim of the Scottish trials, was another connecting link between the philosopher and the lecturer. A moving farewell letter was addressed by Gerrald to Thelwall from the convicts' transport-ship, *The Sovereign*, bound to Botany Bay, 6th May, 1795 (MSS., vol. iii.).

himself Horne Tooke's "political son." But there was no cordial reciprocity on the part of Godwin. The latter ever kept a reserved attitude, till, by an act of open hostility, he snapped his connection with Thelwall. The story of their difference, we think, will set the two characters in distinct relief, and throw much light on the phase of political thought which we have been studying.

They both held the same doctrine and believed in the same ideal—or rather, Thelwall was a professed convert to the political philosophy, which Godwin had based upon the foundations of "necessity" and "utility." But there was an irreconcilable inner discrepancy of spirit between them.

Godwin was essentially a thinker *in abstracto*. When he proved the automatism of man and the mechanism of society; when he expounded with exact precision and consistency that political justice could prevail only in the absence of any form of government, and general happiness be realised only by community of goods, the suppression of tribunals, the cancelling of the marriage-tie, and other startling innovations, he emphatically stated that this argument referred only to the future and to a time when reason should have laid firm hold of all minds, and benevolence deeply penetrated all hearts. True to his premises, he had taken care that his disquisitions should reach none but educated readers, who should be able to attend their purely theoretical character, and who, won by the persuasiveness and logical perfection of his demonstration, should co-operate in a revolution of opinion, the only form of revolution which was not

ephemeral or heinous. He had put the book for sale at the price of three guineas, to make plain his intention of restricting the influence of the new doctrine to the upper classes.

He had not remained indifferent to the French Revolution: on the contrary, it was that great event which had determined the composition of his book, as it had afforded him the proof that the world was mature for the acceptance of truth.[1] But he disapproved of the means of the French Revolution, and foreboded that its achievements would be unstable: violence could not but breed violence and result in some new form of tyranny. He was especially averse to any revolutionary movement in England, where the upper classes, he thought with patriotic pride, were not so thoroughly blinded by prejudice and corrupted by greed as in other countries.[2] He sympathised so far with the Reformers as to approve of the formation of societies out of the better-educated elements of the working class, for the purpose of discussing political subjects. He had viewed without displeasure the

[1] See Preface to "Political Justice."

[2] ". . . It is good to be tried in England, where men are accustomed to some ideas of equity, and law is not entirely what the breath of judges and prosecutors shall make it. . . ." "Unpublished Letter of Godwin to Thelwall," MSS., ii. The unpublished letters of Godwin to Thelwall (contained in MSS., vols. ii. and iii.), upon which we base these remarks and which lighten up the essentially peaceable temper of the philosopher, according with his doctrine, but surprisingly incongruous with his reputation, seem to us important enough to be given in full in an Appendix (*q.v.*).

calling of the Edinburgh Convention, which was meant to give, in all moderation and peaceableness, broad publicity to topics preparatory to the diffusion of the whole truth. When Gerrald, one of the originators of that Convention, was unexpectedly arrested and insidiously impeached by the Lord Chief Justice in a charge that grossly misrepresented his character and his acts, Godwin rose in indignation, and in one night wrote a scathing denunciation of the legal crime that was being hatched against a gentle-hearted, noble-minded citizen.[1]

After Gerrald's conviction and condemnation, the struggle for Reform had entered a more acute phase. Whilst the Ministry intimated their determination to resort to ruthless coercion, the Reformers were preparing for desperate resistance. Thelwall, who then headed the movement, no longer limited his action to debating in societies and clubs, but addressed large meetings. Godwin foresaw the possibility of a clash between the Government and the party of the disaffected, which would be inevitably followed by a more violent current of reaction. He resented the endeavours of the popular leader, which endangered, he thought, the cause of reason and of peaceful melioration. By the middle of 1794, his attitude towards Thelwall began to show unmistakable signs of estrangement.

When Thelwall was confined in the Tower, under threat of capital punishment, neither his sufferings

[1] "W. Godwin and his Friends," by Kegan Paul: L. 1876, i., 130.

nor his courage, nor the distress of his wife and child, caused Godwin to relent from the severity of his judgment. The exponent of the doctrine of "reason" and "necessity" was not the man to yield to feeling—to a call of humanity, or to a touch of sympathy. He denied Thelwall the only service that a friend could do him in his painful situation —that of bringing him the comfort of an occasional visit—and he chose the moment when his friend was labouring under anxiety and grief to reproach him with not bending martyr-like under the blow.[1] He acted thus, not from fearful prudence or from animosity, but because he had become the living embodiment of his philosophy, and meant to act up to his principles under any circumstances.

This is indeed one of the most striking examples of the influence of abstract thought upon conduct, in the course of the *sæculum rationalisticum*. The causes which had produced enthusiasm for Reform in a sentimental idealist like Thelwall had given rise in Godwin, an intellectual idealist, to a kind of dry, geometrical, impassive conviction, which disregarded individuals in the contemplation of the final aim. In the name of man's duty towards mankind, Godwin withheld his help from a disciple and a friend; in the name of general benevolence,

[1] ". . . I am sorry to see in your letter a spirit of resentment and asperity against your persecutors. . . . How senseless and idiot-like it is to be angry with what we know to be a mere passive instrument, moved according to certain regular principles, and in no degree responsible for its operations. . . ." "Unpublished Letter of Godwin to Thelwall," MSS., ii. See Appendix.

he bluntly upbraided a man who was hazarding his life in the vindication of the liberties of Britons; in the name of Reason, he disapproved of Thelwall's intention to appeal for defence to the laws of his country.

Godwin, the type of the speculator *par excellence*, so far shared in the generous illusions of the "friends of mankind" as to believe in the irresistible power of Reason; but he warned his countrymen against taking any step in order to hasten the natural course of rational forces. Thelwall was primarily a man of feeling and of imagination, urged to action by sympathy for his fellow-creatures and desire for social justice. He viewed the practical bearings of theories, and strove towards immediate results through means sanctioned by English traditions of liberty. Godwin was a revolutionary thinker with aristocratic prepossessions, who distrusted the people and did not *feel* for them. Thelwall was head and soul a democrat, who had faith in the people, and was bent upon promoting their interests peacefully and rightfully, but without failing to impress the privileged classes with the sense of the growing number, organisation and strength of the popular party.

Towards the end of 1795, the wave of popular agitation having risen to its flood while the restraining Bills were being discussed in Parliament, an anonymous pamphlet came out, entitled: "Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr. Pitt's Bills, by a Lover of Order," in which the campaign of the Reformers was branded as criminal, and their leader reproved as an evil-doer, a traitor to Justice and

Reason. From internal evidence—from the nature of the argument and the tone of the style—Thelwall recognised the manner of the author of "Political Justice." Ungentle behaviour and private rebuke he had borne from him with patience: but he could not but keenly resent this public attack from a man who, professing, in the very pages of the pamphlet, his doctrinal agreement with the party of liberty, gave the assistance and support of a member of that party to the most violent onslaught that had yet been directed by the Government against the supporters of democracy. He could not but take alarm at an act that would discredit and discourage the last resistance of the Opposition in Parliament, and hasten the moment when any defence of the rights of the people by writing or public speaking would be suppressed. Slackening of intercourse had followed the first difference between the two men; but there had been no loss of esteem. This time, Thelwall challenged his accuser, in terms of mixed indignation and contempt, to confess the authorship of the pamphlet and to account for its contents. "... It is with difficulty that I can believe that William Godwin is the man who has taken the advantage of the alarm and fury of the moment to join the war-hoops of slanderous misrepresentation against an individual whom every engine of Tyranny and Falsehood is at work to destroy—that William Godwin is the man who has dared to accuse an individual, the purity of whose heart and the sincerity of whose benevolence he knows, of bringing the passions of men into training for lamp-post massacres, and ripening

them for purposes similar to those of the Jacobin Society of Paris—that William Godwin is the man who has publicly assimilated the friend of whom he has so often, to his face at least, been the private panegyrist, to a miserable enthusiast whose mind appears to have been a curious tissue of folly, madness, cowardice and hypocrisy! . . ." He felt particularly wounded by the passage in which Godwin had referred to his professed peaceable dispositions as "saving clauses." He added: "If it is indeed true that you wrote this pamphlet, I may be told perhaps to look at the salvoes about 'talent' and 'original purity of intentions'; but such *saving clauses* only produce transitions from indignation to contempt."[1]

Godwin avowed the authorship of the publication in a pert note, in which he refused "to engage in the tediousness of an epistolary correspondence upon the subject," although offering personal explanation. He alleged not to have written one thing "which he had not pressed upon Thelwall's personal attention again and again with earnest anxiety"; and concluded by ironically and provocatively surmising that Thelwall, in his anger, might perhaps "contribute, as far as his power extended, to consign him also to the lamp-post"—a taunt which shows that even the cold-blooded philosopher might be heated by polemics into personal animosity and spiteful malice, and might be carried away by passion beyond the control of omnipotent reason.

[1] The correspondence of Thelwall and Godwin touching this matter is to be found in MSS., vol. iii.

Before the passing of the Bills, Thelwall, who was then publishing the second volume of the collected numbers of *The Tribune*, presented his defence in the preface of the book, being so far respectful of his adversary as not to give out his name against his wish. Godwin sent back a rejoinder with the request that it should be published in some subsequent number of the periodical—a request with which Thelwall complied in the third and last volume of *The Tribune*. In this last communication, Godwin recovered his self-possession, and once more publicly stated in dignified terms, without any aggressive or vituperative personalities, his doctrine of non-resistance and persuasion, which, above all polemics, remains the characteristic and original feature of his thought.[1]

[1] Here is the note, by which Godwin wished to conclude the argument: "The writer of the pamphlet subscribed a 'Lover of Order,' which is animadverted on in the Preface to the second volume of *The Tribune*, requests the insertion of the following remarks in some subsequent number:

"They have two objects.

"The first to disavow any purpose of imputing sinister intentions to the lecturer. I have delivered my ideas on the general impropriety of such imputations with as much precision as I was capable of in p. 15 of the pamphlet. . . . When I styled the lecturer's exhortations to benevolence 'saving clauses,' I meant nothing more than to express my opinion of their inefficacy, and that the anger he excited would constantly get the better of the benevolence. . . .

"My second object is to say a few words as to the supposed unseasonableness of my animadversions upon the lectures. The lecturer, it seems, would have had me trust to appearances. 'They were about to be closed,' he says, 'as it appeared, for ever.' I am not apt to trust to appearances. I had not that

No less important as illustrating the movement of thought at that time are the relations between Thelwall and Coleridge. In the spring of 1796, Coleridge and Thelwall, one living in Bristol, the other in London, were acquainted only through their writings and their political and literary fame, when they started a correspondence. It was Thelwall who initiated the connection. He felt himself impelled to express to Coleridge, together with his admiration and love, his disapprobation of an article of his in the *Watchman*.[1] His letter was written with "a zeal. . . which proved that he was deeply interested in the editor."[2]

faith in Lord Grenville's and Mr. Pitt's Bills as to suppose they would put a close for ever to everything that I might regard as intemperate or dangerous in the partisans of liberty. . . . I believed that this was a time in which it was particularly to be desired that an individual should be found who could preserve his mind untainted with the headlong rage of factions, whether for men in power or against them (pp. 1-2).

"It seems that I have a higher opinion of the importance of the lectures than is entertained by the lecturer. He thinks I ought to have been prevented from delivering my sentiments to the public respecting them by considerations of friendship and esteem. I, on the contrary, believed that the public stake in their tendency, whether beneficial or otherwise, was of more moment than to be superseded by those principles of gentlemanly decorum, which will perhaps never endure an examination in the courts of morality and reason. I acted in this instance with that preference of public to private considerations, which it is in the object of the lectures to recommend." (*The Tribune*, vol. iii., No. XXXVIII., pp. 101-103.)

[1] Coleridge, who had been recently obliged by pecuniary difficulties to give up Pantisocracy, was then trying to start a philosophical and democratic magazine, *The Watchman*, which lasted only a few weeks.

[2] "Letters of S. T. Coleridge," edited by E. H. Coleridge, L., two vols., 1895.

Coleridge answered in a tone of no less friendly abruptness, intermingling passionate argument with the expression of his warmest sympathy. "You have given me the affection of a brother," he wrote, "and I repay you in kind."[1] An epistolary intercourse ensued, in which (as we may judge from Coleridge's letters, which alone have come down to us), both correspondents trusted each other with their secret thoughts or asked each other's advice in the most unrestrained and cordial manner.

They both lived the life of the heart and of the imagination; they were moved as men, and inspired as poets, by the same love of their fellow-creatures and the same yearning for social justice; they conjured up to the mind's eye the same ideal of absolute right and universal happiness. They both cherished keen sympathy for the French, who had set the high example of a great people taking Reason as their guide, and they violently disapproved of the conduct of England, waging war against Liberty. They both, sadly and reluctantly, resigned the title of English patriots, which could no longer be made to agree with Truth and Love, and exchanged it for the nobler title of "patriots of the world." They admired in each other's poems the strains which derived their pathos from humanity, which rang with curses on social wrongs, or were clothed in the radiance of ideal justice. At dark hours, when the prospect of collective happiness seemed far removed, they both liked to dream of individual bliss in pastoral peace. They were united by community of

[1] A Letter from Coleridge to Thelwall, 13th May, 1796.

democratic and romantic feelings before having ever met or sealed their friendship through personal acquaintance. They presented each other with their published works and communicated to each other their manuscript poems, requesting and offering friendly criticism.

With his usual expansiveness of feeling and exuberance of enthusiasm, Coleridge gave himself up passionately to the joy of this new intercourse and to the admiration of his new friend. For a time, Thelwall stood in his eyes as the hero of the struggle for social justice. He well knew his own remissness, inconsistency of purpose, impotence of will: despite his sympathy for the oppressed and his desire of Reform, he felt incapable of strenuous and systematic action. Thelwall, on the contrary, under trying circumstances, had shown the most courageous perseverance. When driven out of one field of activity, he had turned to another; when forbidden to lecture on the "politics of these realms," he had addressed his audience on ancient history; when compelled to drop his periodical, he had settled down to writing pamphlets; when hunted out of London, he had gone forth an itinerant lecturer through the provinces. "I am not fit for public life," wrote Coleridge. . . . "Meanwhile do *you* uplift the torch dreadlessly and show to mankind the face of that idol which they have worshipped in darkness!"[1]

Not only what Thelwall did, but what he wrote, in Coleridge's opinion, bore the marks of uncommon merit. He praised the pamphlet which Thelwall had

[1] A Letter from Coleridge to Thelwall, 17th December, 1796.

been working at since it had become dangerous for him to edit a periodical.[1] "Your answer to Burke is, I will not say, the best, for that would be no praise; it is certainly the only good one, and it is a very good one. In style and in reflectiveness it is, I think, your *chef d'œuvre*."[2] He bestowed eulogy on Thelwall's poetical productions. "*The Peripatetic* pleased me . . . because it let me into your heart; the poetry is frequently sweet and possesses the fire of feeling. . . .[3] There were some verses of yours in the last *Monthly Magazine*, with which I was much pleased — calm good sense combined with feeling, and conveyed in harmonious verse and a chaste pleasing imagery."[4]

At the end of 1796, Coleridge, despairing of altering the moral and social state of the world, either by recruiting settlers for a Pantisocratic colony in America, or by propagating the doctrine of Reason in England, resolved to practise rational living, whilst procuring frugal sustenance for himself and his family by turning a philosophical farmer. He made Thelwall the confidant of his determination, of his hopes, of the preparation and realisation of his plan. After he had become the tenant of a cottage in the little village of Nether Stowey—where he was not, as he had fancied, to live on the produce of his own garden,

[1] "The Rights of Nature against the Usurpations of Establishment—being letters to the People of Britain in answer to the Recent Effusions of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, 1796."

[2] A Letter from Coleridge to Thelwall, 22nd June, 1796.

[3] *Id.*

[4] To Thelwall, 17th December, 1796.

but where he was to spend two sedate and fruitful years in the companionship of Thomas Poole and under the moral ascendancy of Wordsworth—Thelwall, abused, ostracised, assaulted, cut out from the political exertions and literary occupations that had thus far filled his existence and supplied his few wants, thought, as a last resource, of joining Coleridge in his retreat and of leading with him the same philosophical, romantic and inexpensive life.

In order to arrange for the particulars of his settlement and to make the personal acquaintance of Coleridge, whom he had not yet seen, Thelwall paid a visit to Stowey in July, 1797. The foretaste which he then had of the hoped-for pastoral happiness in the company of his poetical and philosophical friend overreached all the Arcadian dreams in which he had indulged, since he had been so steeped in bitterness and disappointment. In his letters to Stella, and in a copy of verse, written to celebrate the occasion, he described in a glittering flow of images, and a tender strain of rural enthusiasm, the joys of those hours spent with Coleridge and Wordsworth, in the delightful nooks of a picturesque country. By a tacit understanding, the three fellow-poets and philosophers left aside the subject of politics, unless it was occasionally to hint at their common loathing of them,[1] and they endlessly expatiated upon Nature, Love, Rural Quiet,

[1] Coleridge reports the following bit of dialogue which took place in a beautiful recess of the Quantocks: "Citizen John, this is a fine place to talk treason in." "Nay! Citizen Samuel, it is rather a place to make a man forget that there is any necessity for treason." (Coleridge's *Table Talk*, 26th July, 1830.)

and, under the guidance of Coleridge, upon metaphysics. On the morrow of his leaving this enchanting spot, Thelwall lulled the sadness of the parting by composing verses upon the expected pleasure of the reunion:

"Ah! 'twould be sweet, beneath the neighb'ring thatch,
In philosophic amity to dwell,
Inditing moral verse, or tale, or theme,
Gay or instructive; and it would be sweet
With kindly interchange of mutual aid
To delve our little garden plots, the while
Sweet converse flow'd, suspending oft the arm
And half-driven spade, while, eager, one propounds,
And listens one, weighing each pregnant word,
And pondering fit reply, that may untwist
The knotty point—perchance, of import high—
Of moral Truth, of Causes infinite,
Created Power, or uncreated Worlds
Eternal and uncaus'd! or whatsoe'er
Of Metaphysic, or of Ethic Lore,
The Mind, with curious subtilty, pursues—
Agreeing or dissenting—sweet alike,
When wisdom, and not Victory, the end. . . ." [1]

Great obstacles opposed the meeting again of the two friends.

An arduous undertaking it was for anybody to stand sponsor for the egregious revolutionist, John Thelwall, in the year 1797—the more fraught with danger for Thomas Poole, whom it would have befallen to answer for the "disreputable" character of an "acquitted felon," as he had already assumed the responsibility of introducing first Coleridge, then

[1] "Lines written at Bridgewater, in Somersetshire, on the 27th July, 1797, during a long Excursion in quest of a peaceful Retreat." *Poems chiefly Written in Retirement*, 1802.

Wordsworth, into the timorous community of Nether Stowey. If Thomas Poole had attempted such a thing he would have jeopardised his reputation as a gentleman and his custom as a manufacturer. In spite of Coleridge's entreaties, he declined to interfere in favour of the persecuted Reformer. A certain Mr. Chubb of Bridgewater, to whom Coleridge next applied,[1] answered that "he was willing to undertake the office of procuring a cottage for Thelwall, provided it was thought right that the latter should settle there; but this he left for T. Poole and Coleridge to settle."[2] Consequently the situation remained unchanged. Coleridge concluded: "Come in two or three months — take lodgings at Bridgewater — familiarise the people to your name and appearance, and when the monstrosity of the thing is gone off, and the people shall have begun to consider you as a man whose mouth won't eat them, and whose pocket is better adapted for a bundle of sonnets than the transportation or ambush-place of a French army, then you may take a house; but indeed (I say it with a very sad but a very clear conviction), at present I see that much evil and little good would result from your settling here."[3] The design had to be given up.

We shall venture to presume that it was better after all for Coleridge and Thelwall not to come into

[1] This letter of Coleridge to Mr. Chubb, unpublished till very recently, has been printed by Mr. J. L. Hammond (in "C. J. Fox, a Political Study," p. 121, note), upon communication by the recipient's grandson.

[2] A Letter from Coleridge to Thelwall, autumn, 1797.

[3] *Id.*

closer and more prolonged contact. Their understanding, we think, could not have stood the test of a more intimate acquaintance. We do not only mean to say that Coleridge's impulsive and fickle temper was likely soon to estrange him from a man whom for a time he had hailed friend and brother. We allude to a virtual repugnancy between the minds of the two men, which could not but have thrown them wide apart, separated, as it were, by one long stage of the human progress.

Thelwall was essentially a man of his time, whose mind had received the impress of ambient forces, and, lacking elasticity of its own, had kept—and would for ever keep—the stamp of the eighteenth century. Coleridge, although he had been touched by the same influences, already bade fair to transcend, by the inner strength of his genius, the limitations of contemporary thought; as early as 1797, the man that he was already foreshadowed the man that he was to become—the seer and the sage, the bard of romantic song, the prophet of theosophic mysticism, the leader of a moral revival. Thelwall, a typical "man of feeling" and "philosopher," now pouring passion into the geometrical mould of the intellect, now taking rational formulæ as the guides of his feelings, often fell into the characteristic errors of his age: mistaking simplicity for truth, setting up logical consistency as the law of moral and social progress, yielding to the intemperate hope of removing all human evils by the mere play of mental and political mechanism. Coleridge, instinct with the same human sympathy and the same universal benevolence, was

soon to free himself from the narrowness of eighteenth century rationalism by the strength of his imagination, to guard himself against the delusive singleness of logical deduction by an insight into shadowy truths and facts not amenable to the test of the understanding, to break loose from the shackles of mechanicalism through an instinctive sense of the spontaneous and the complex, a natural reverence for the mysterious, a leaning towards the wonderful, a yearning after the infinite. The opposition in the characters of these two men—united at one time by a community of feeling and desire, but gradually severed by a growing discrepancy of beliefs and aspirations—strikingly points out the distance which separates the thought of the eighteenth from that of the nineteenth century.[1]

The hostility of the inhabitants of Stowey was not an isolated example of the hatred that pursued Thelwall, long after he had desisted from lecturing and taking any part in active politics. Wherever he passed on his journey in search of a place of residence, in the summer of 1797, he stood in danger of a hostile reception. In several cases he was brutally assaulted by the mob and denied any aid by the magistrates.[2]

At last, the assistance of a few friends enabled him to stock a small farm at Llys-Wen in Wales, far from

[1] On the phases of the change which Coleridge's philosophical and political tenets underwent in 1797-98, see our book, "The French Revolution and English Poets."

[2] In "Prefatory Memoir, etc.," p. 30, he tells us of the shameful conduct towards him of the magistrates of Ashby de la Zouch.

the scenes of political strife, where he made an attempt to carry out the design, in which he had been frustrated at Stowey, to combine farming and novel-writing in order to secure a livelihood and find peace in retirement.

CHAPTER III

THE "REFORMER"

IN the two preceding chapters, we have traced Thelwall's feelings and hopes to the causes from which they seemed more directly to spring, and have shown how the French Revolution, breathing enthusiasm into his sentiments and beliefs, made him one of the most sincere and most resolute champions of the rights of the people in England. We shall now proceed to study in detail Thelwall's practical views and precise plans of Reform. How far did he conciliate sympathy for the poor and the oppressed, longing for right and justice, and desire for more equality, with an exact knowledge of the real state of the country and a sense of the necessities and possibilities of the moment? Did his admiration for the French philosophers and the French Revolutionists breed in him the wish to accomplish the same sweeping change in England by the same subversive means? Or did his reforming spirit, though quickened by the beauty and hopefulness of the French ideal, conform to the English tradition of temperate, peaceful, and gradual improvement? These are the matters to which we purpose now to devote our attention.

Thelwall saw and proclaimed the utter inadequacy of popular representation in England and the shameful corruption of Parliament—whereby, indeed, he showed no particular keenness of observation, as these abuses had been for some time exposed by the leaders of the Reform party, and as the Tory minister himself, William Pitt, in 1785, had moved a Bill for their redress. But it was no commonplace merit in Thelwall to be alive to *social* abuses, to have an eye to the condition of the more destitute members of the community, to foresee the evils which the economic transformation then taking place was to inflict upon the working class, to make a plea for a less gross disproportion of fortunes and a less outrageous disregard of human dignity. This sensitiveness to the misery and degradation of the masses Thelwall owed to the French ideal (which he had adopted) of respect for the human person, of equality and of human fellowship.

When it came to practical views and actual plans of Reform, Thelwall no longer proved the disciple of J. J. Rousseau or of Godwin, satisfied by nothing short of perfect government according to the dictates of Reason, but showed himself in the new character of a student of social facts, instinct with an almost modern scientific spirit of careful observation and guarded inference. He addressed himself to inquiring into the remediable abuses of the then state of English civilisation. He turned to account his journeys through the provinces to gather information as to the condition of the agricultural labourers, who composed the bulk of the lower class, and of the

industrial wage-earners, who were daily growing in number.

He was struck by the extent of the lands which remained waste from the carelessness or the wanton selfishness of the owners. Supporting the facts of his own finding by the authority of the "Report of the Committee appointed by the Board of Agriculture," he made it known that out of 49,436,164 acres which formed the total area of the soil of England, only 27,329,155 were cultivated; 22,107,009 acres lay untilled, whereas the proportion of land incapable of improvement amounted only to 1,000,000 acres. What benefit it would have been for the people at large if the tenth part of the expenses of corruption had been used to cultivate waste lands![1]

Enclosure Bills, which, if based on fair principles, might have done much towards favouring high cultivation, were designed by the land-owning gentry, who had the upper hand in Parliament, to merge small freeholds into large estates.

Commerce was submitted to regulations which benefited only the rich. The most important of those regulations, the corn laws, passed in the House by the same majority of wealthy land-holders and borough-proprietors, kept up the prices of the staple article of food, thereby superadding a huge tax to the already crushing tax-burden of the poor. They offered a bounty on exportation, and imposed a prohibitive duty on importation when corn was under 50s. per quarter. Now, as Thelwall explained, good wheat might be considerably over 50s., and yet the ports be

[1] *The Tribune*, vol. ii.

closed to foreign commerce. The officers took the average in every district for the quantities sold. If, for instance, they found 50 quarters sold at 53s. (=£132 10s.), 200 quarters at 52s. (=£750), and 400 quarters at 49s. (=£980), the sum total would be 650 quarters sold for £1,632 10s., and the average price 50s. But good corn was at 53s., and might remain long at that price before the ports were opened. Nor was this all. To keep their proceeds mounting as the price rose, propertied men had Acts passed to alter the average: in a few years they had changed it from 48s. to 50s.

The war had made things considerably worse: from increase in the price of freightage (10 per cwt., instead of 4s., for sugar freight), from the rise of the insurance rate (from 6 to 16 per cwt.), from the difficulties created by the insecurity of the seas, the embargo, etc., from reduced production in the countries which provided England with corn (the Rhine States, Prussia, Holland), the necessities of life had become so dear as to stand as far from the reach of the poor as luxuries were before.

Speculation on corn was an increase of the evil. In the Isle of Wight,[1] for instance, where the noblemen had succeeded in gradually ousting the farmers from their estates, and cultivated their own lands by the aid of stewards, Thelwall observed the following facts: The land-owner, being in no pressing need of money, hoarded up his grain. "Having no particular necessities to compel him to do justice to society and bring his corn to a fair market, he speculates and

[1] Thelwall spent there the summer of 1795.

waits for an opportunity to take advantage of the artificial distress of mankind. To such a height are these speculations carried, that corn in the Isle of Wight, in the summer of 1795, reaches the price of £20 and £24 a load standing on the ground, though in the memory of the oldest man alive in that island, it was never £12 before." (*The Tribune*, ii., p. 233).

A few examples selected from a great many which Thelwall carefully took pains to collect will make it plain to what extremity the poor were reduced at that time. A parallel which he drew of the relation of wages to the cost of living at various periods of English history and in the last decade of the eighteenth century brings out a striking proof of the decrease in the meagre comforts of common people. "In the time of Queen Elizabeth," said he to his audience of Beaufort Buildings, "the price of a sucking pig or a goose was 4d., and of a good capon 3d. (Hume's 'History of England,' vol. viii., App. III.). To-day the same articles will cost 7s. instead of 4d., and 6s. instead of 3d. The wages of the labourer ought therefore to have increased in the proportion of 22 to 1, to have kept pace with the increase in the price of food. Now, the price of labour has indeed increased from 8d. to 1s. in the country, and from 1s. to 1s. 3d. in towns." (*The Tribune*, vol. ii., pp. 1-27.)[1] Addressing one of the mass meetings gathered in Copenhagen Fields at the call of the Corresponding Society, Thelwall exclaimed: "To show you how much you have profited by that increase of wealth

[1] Lecture of 29th April, 1795.

and grandeur, of which your oppressors boast so much, suffer me to inform you that four or five hundred years ago (when the wages of a common labourer of the fields were 2d. a day), the labourer with the wages of twenty days' labour—that is to say, with 40d.—could purchase a quarter of wheat, which at this time (could the poor day-labourer, as things now go, ever expect to save money enough to buy a quarter of wheat at a time) would cost him 84s.—that is to say, the price of eighty days' labour according to the present average of the price of a day's labour in husbandry." ("Speech of the 26th of October, 1795," p. 8.) Quoting facts within the compass of his own remembrance, Thelwall could draw the following table:

20 OR 25 YEARS AGO.	NOW.
Bread, 4d. a quartern	9¼d.
Boiling beef, 2d. or 2½d. ...	6d. or 6½d.
Roasting do., 4d.	8d.
Pork and veal, 4½d.	8½d.
Mutton, 3½d.; 4d.	8d.
Good salt butter, 5d.	11d.
Loaf sugar, 6d.	1s. 1d.
Moist sugar, 2½d.	9d.
Coals, till within last 7 years, 1s. ...	3s.

(MSS., vol. v.; *cf. The Tribune*, ii., 13.)

A contemporary document, to which Thelwall himself referred, vouches for the absolute accuracy and sincerity of this telling evidence. One, Rev. J. Davies, rector of Barkham, in Berkshire, who had

spent many years in the country in close contact with the poor, published a minute description of their condition in a book entitled: "The Case of Labourers in Husbandry (1787)," in which he drew several comparative accounts of a labourer's earnings and expenses. Here is one of them, which confirms everything that Thelwall gave out as a result of his own experience or observation:

WEEKLY EXPENSES

of a family consisting of a man, his wife and five children, the eldest eight years of age, the youngest an infant:

Flour, 7 gallons and a half, at 10d. per gallon	6s. 3d.
Yeast, to make it into bread, 2½d., and salt 1½d.	4d.
Bacon, 1 lb., boiled at two or three times with greens; the pot-liquor, with bread and potatoes, making a mess for the children	8d.
Tea, 1 oz., 2d.; ¾ lb. of sugar, 6d.; ½ lb. of butter or lard, 4d.	1s. 0d.
Soap, ¼ lb., at 9d. per lb. ...	2¼d.
Candles, ⅛ lb., one week with another, at a medium, at 9d.	3d.
Thread, thrum and worsted, for mending apparel ...	3d.
Total,	8s. 11¼d.

EARNINGS.

The man receives the common weekly wages, 8 months a year	7s.
By task-work, the remaining 4 months, he earns something more: His extra earnings, if divided among the 52 weeks in the year, would increase the weekly wages about ...	1s.
The wife's common work is to bake the bread, to wash and mend ragged clothes and to look after the children; but at bean-setting, hay-making, harvest, etc., she earns as much as comes, one week with another, to about	6d.
Total,	8s. 6d.

There was each week a deficiency in earnings of 5½d., and, Thelwall observes, the distress increased considerably in the following years, till, during the war, it reached a climax.

Another test of the continuous decline in the conditions of living among the poor was the steady swelling of the poor-rates. According to the Overseer's Accounts, the average yearly increase, which was £23,034 from 1753 to 1776, grew to £52,719 from 1776 to 1780. It went on enlarging during the last two decades of the century, and yet became more and

more inadequate to alleviate the most cruel forms of misery. We read in *The Peripatetic* that in one district of North Wiltshire,[1] the population of a whole village was saved from actual starvation only because a wealthy farmer gave up for them his sheep-turnips. This farmer rented the whole parish, and would have had to bear the expense of a considerably enlarged poor-rate if his wretched labourers had become chargeable to the poor law. "By letting his humanity, therefore, dispose of his sheep-turnips, he, in fact, took them to a good market, and sheltered himself from a heavier contribution."[2]

The privileged and propertied classes did not heed, or even notice, the hardships of the poor. The Lord Chief-Justice Clarke, in the course of the Scottish

[1] Vol. i., p. 143.

[2] One may read a confirmation of Thelwall's statement in an article of *The Spectator* (3rd October, 1903), "The Village a Hundred Years Ago," compiled from the account-book of the Overseers of the Poor-Rates in an English village from 1782 to 1817.

The village numbered 300 inhabitants. Before the war the people enjoyed a comparatively prosperous state. Gradually, as the war-clouds thickened, the sum yearly paid in relief of the poor rose from £120 to more than treble the amount. In 1794, it jumped to £554, and within the following eight years, another £100 was added. Then the relief granted to the poor of that parish was at the rate of more than £2 per head of the whole population.

Farmers, who had thus to support the starving peasantry, on the other hand, raised enormous profits from the price of corn. Flour was sold at the incredible price of 86s to 90s. a sack.

The distress brought with it a proportionable increase of crime. Gaol-money, contributed by the parish towards the maintenance of the county prison, swelled from a few shillings to £14.

Sedition Trials, had expressed the opinion prevalent in the upper ranks of society, when he had said, with the weight and authority which his office and the solemnity of the circumstance imparted to his speech: "The poor of this country, particularly those infatuated individuals styling themselves Friends of the People, pay no taxes. It is the landed-property men alone that pay the taxes, for they pay those poor people for their labour, and consequently they pay the taxes. In the words of a Scottish nobleman, they may exclaim: 'We gie the poor the siller to pay the taxes wi'. Gin they be na pleased wi' our wise government, they can tak their alls on their backs an' pack off wi' themselves. In Gude's name, *we* can't tak our laund upon our back; na, we mun stay. Let them gang; we'll be better quat o' them.'"[1]

A time was to come when—under the influences of the moral and social revival determined by the French Revolution, and heralded by such men as Thelwall—the feelings expressed by the Lord Chief-Justice Clarke, which fairly represented those generally entertained by the great in his times, would be repudiated even by the descendants and political successors of these men, and would make room for some recognition of the social duty of the ruling class.

While the necessaries of life grew more and more scarce in the cottage, and the "swinish multitude starved by their empty troughs,"[2] borough-mongering,

[1] "Morton's Trial."

[2] One of the telling phrases which now and then shot through Thelwall's speeches. "Lecture on Spies and Informers," p. 11.

the squandering of pensions and the bartering for votes shamelessly went on—not only protracting the political evil of corrupt government, but setting in the social evil of demoralisation. "While placemen, and the tools of placemen, plunder the realm by wholesale, and with the profits of their rapine purchase of pretended representatives the permission to plunder us still more, and enslave us, and rob us of the liberty of reasoning into the bargain—shame on you, low-born, half-starved cottage wretches! While mighty ——s and descendants from the bastard blood of ——s rob us by L——s P——t, suffer not a coal to blaze within our grates, or an action to be brought for the recovery of a just debt, till they have levied contribution upon us — you, low plebeians, vulgar, base-born hinds, born in the pale of matrimonial beggary, be hanged if you dare violate the sacred fences of your masters!" (*The Peripatetic*, i., 142.) Thus, indeed, in terms embittered by righteous indignation, did Thelwall raise an outcry against that evil, worse than inequality of fortune or inequality of rights—that abuse, which is at the bottom of most social abuses and more surely stirs up a spirit of revolt than even jealousy or greed: inequality before the moral law.

Misery drove large numbers of labourers into the ranks of the army or of the navy, while their wives and children were left to pine and starve at home. But as the demand for recruits consequent on the war was greater than the unemployed and the hunger-bitten could supply, *crimping* and *pressing* were systematically and inhumanely resorted to.

Thelwall exposes these abuses, branding with shame and infamy the Government that in defiance of the laws of England thus invaded personal liberty.[1]

Thelwall carefully and anxiously watched the economic revolution which the sudden and rapid growth of industry was then achieving in England, with a view to ascertaining how far it harmed or benefited the working class, what share of the wealth and plenty consequent on the increase of production accrued to the workers, and above all, regarding the problem, from the moral standpoint, whether the new prosperity did anything towards raising the standard of humanity in the country. A painstaking examination of facts, together with a firm reverence for guiding principles, led him to form an opinion equally removed from the two extreme positions of the day: the unfeeling manufacturer's contempt of ignoble suffering and disregard of humble worth, and the sentimental

[1] Among other facts, he tells the following stories: "An orphan boy of sixteen, living at his aunt's, was accosted on his way to school by two soldiers and promised plenty of money and good liquor if he accepted to enlist. On the boy's refusal, the soldiers seized him, put a gag in his mouth and took him to a coach waiting close by. After having kept the youth a whole day in a cellar, they conveyed him at night to a place which later proved to be Manchester. There the youth managed to make his escape, letting himself down from the window of the public-house by means of his bed-sheets.

"At Poole, a merchant vessel, arriving at port, was boarded by a press-gang under the conduct of a lieutenant, and the crew summoned to surrender under pretence of a warrant issued against them. As they resisted, three of them were shot down, the others taken prisoners, carried to gaol, and, after a show of a trial pressed into His Majesty's navy."

idealist's abhorrence of a novel mode of activity that destroyed old associations and traditional forms of happiness and virtue. Thelwall, though indignant at the inhuman conditions often imposed upon the workers, refrained from a wholesale condemnation of the factory system. Foreseeing the invaluable change for the better that it might introduce into the life of English labourers, he thought of correcting its evils without destroying a source of future good, and he eagerly sought the means of conciliating the necessities of industry with the bodily and mental wants of the individual. It was a mere sketch of the labour problem that he drew, as might be expected at a time when the data of the question hardly began to make themselves manifest. Yet this early solution of the crucial problem of our age, directly suggested to Thelwall by his familiarity with and devotion to the principles of the French Revolution, strikes us as affording a proof that the French Revolution was not primarily destructive, but was to become, once the temporary and local distemper was over, a constructive force of social ethics, and a humanising influence in the economic as well as in the political life of the modern world.

Thelwall saw the depressing effects and felt the relentless cruelty of the factory system, such as it was practised in his time. He denounced the injustice of the law that allowed combinations of employers and forbade, under the most drastic penalties, unions of labourers. "Why is it," he exclaimed, "that factors, merchants, wholesale dealers, and opulent manufacturers can enter into

combinations with impunity? monopolise as they please? and fix, in their conventions, the price of commodities at discretion?—while mechanics that enter into associations to appreciate their own labour are sentenced like felons to a gaol?" ("The Rights of Britons," pp. 41, 42.) The consequence of this was that manufacturers often abused their favoured situation to keep down wages, or, still worse, to rob the miserable working people of their scanty earnings. Thelwall knew of employers "who took the liberty, when the work was brought to them, to *scotch*, as it is called, the spinners at their own will and pleasure; so that under various pretences, so much being considered as waste, and so many deductions being made for every pound that was spun by the poor individual, she never got paid for above three-quarters, when it came to be estimated by the masters." (*The Tribune*, ii., "Lecture of the 29th of April, 1795," p. 34.) If any great calamity like war occurred, it inflicted upon the workers an aggravation of misery. "When any general national hardship takes place, by means of which the prices of the articles of life are increased, but by means of which, at the same time, a quantum of labour becomes less, the master takes a snug and convenient opportunity to scotch the wages of the journeymen." (*Id.*, p. 32.)

In the course of his pedestrian excursion through western England, in the summer of 1797, Thelwall sadly observed the ruin wrought in the bodies and in the souls of grown-up and of youthful factory-slaves by overwork, ill-health, and promiscuity. He

jotted down in his note-book such hasty remarks as the following: "At Froome (*i.e.*, Frome), cloth-mill. Women waiting for spare wool to be spun by hand, 2½d. per lb.; great work spin 2 lb. a day. Children in the factory, 1s. 6d. to 2s. 6d. per week. Day, fourteen hours. Pallid and miserable. Women who pick knots off the work, 4s. 6d. or 5s. per week; little perquisite of wool picked off, perhaps 6d. per week. . . . At Nailsworth, woollen manufactories. Dyers, their pallid and unwholesome looks. Hired by the week, 9s. per week, constant employ. Weavers often standing still waiting for work. Some of them who have large families live on nothing but barley bread. Spinning-mills: Sixteen men, women and children working in a small room so blocked up by machinery as to prevent circulation of air. Most of the persons in this room pallid, with sickly sweat. The children emaciated." Reflecting upon what he saw, the thoughtful visitor both realised the nature of the evil and the possibility of a remedy. He added: "Machinery that brings a multitude to labour in one spot, bad. *Regulations possible.*" (MS. Notes on a "Pedestrian Excursion.")

Thelwall was not inattentive to the few brightening rays that gleamed on the sombre horizon, and betokened a more or less distant—but coming—change in the situation. He noticed that in the larger industrial plants, provided with the newest mechanical devices, newly built, supported by large capital, and seldom suffering from business-slackening, the journeymen received higher wages than agricultural labourers, and worked in sufficiently healthy

conditions. At Malmesbury, which boasted of the superiority of its manufactory over all others, he drafted the following remarks: "Healthy, florid, decent and comfortable appearance of children. Much of the business furnishes good exercise, as picking, burling, shearing. The places not so low-roofed as among the Manchester cotton-mills. Not many in an apartment, seldom more than four or five. Lively and intelligent countenances of shearers, jocularity." ("Pedestrian Excursion.") In some cases, great ameliorations had been effected in the housing and ways of living of the poor by the rise of local industry. "Swansea, not considerable twenty or thirty years ago, has the appearance of a new town rising from the ashes of an old one. The new, comfortable houses are comparatively large. Old cottages, miserable ruins. The factories scattered about on banks of the river. Several spacious buildings at small distance from the town give a fine appearance to the banks of river and canal." (*Id.*) The wages were often very high in comparison to those of husbandry. "Near Monmouth, iron-works. Men work twelve hours a day at forge (Sundays and all), and eighteen hours every other Saturday. Earn 20s. or 24s. per week. . . . A manufactory of brass and copper at Bayswater. Price of labour mostly about 18s. per week. Women will earn 3s. or 4s. Persons employed at the forge will earn a guinea and a half or two guineas. Obliged to drink immoderate quantities; live very well." (*Id.*) Thelwall observed a fact which was then unfrequent, but which he foresaw would one day become generalised: the rise

of wages in husbandry following suit to that of wages in industry. In the country about Swansea field-labourers received 1s. 2d. per day—that is, 2d. more than in other counties. He did not unduly indulge in laments about the looks of factory-workers, whose sooty faces, soiled dress, and city-grown paleness, contrasting with the ruddiness and comparative cleanliness of ploughmen, inspired the sentimentalists of the day with uncalled-for pity. At the woollen manufactory of Wooton-under-Edge, he noted down: "Filth and rags—but tolerably healthy." In several places he witnessed the workers' own satisfaction with their lot, which manifested itself in the pride of belonging to a factory, and in "the vanity to make it appear that they earned more than they did." (*Id.*)

Thus Thelwall, at this early date, grasped the problem of industrial production with enough mastery to span in thought the immense scope of possibility which opened before his country, and to anticipate that, from the growth of manufacturing, plenty would accrue to the nation at large, of which the lower class might—nay, ought to—get a reasonable share. His public career was cut too short by the swelling wave of reaction for him to draw out a detailed plan of social legislation; but his it was to outline the social as well as the political progress of the "proletariat."

We shall examine upon what principles he rested his notions of the advance towards justice and equality, investigating first his political tenets and then his views of social reform.

As far as merely political matters were concerned,

Thelwall had many common tenets with the Whigs —or more exactly with the few staunch members of the Whig party that kept up the resistance against the Ministry—and yet he was decidedly at variance with them on important points. This divergence of opinion may help to elucidate how far the doctrine of the Reformers, greatly influenced by the principles of the French Revolution, outreached the traditional Liberalism of the Opposition.

Such Whigs as Fox, Sheridan, Erskine, Grey, and their handful of supporters, went so far in vindication of the popular cause as to declare themselves admirers of the French Revolution, to oppose the war, to resist the restrictive Bills, and to uphold the movement for Parliamentary Reform. They occasionally sat in banquets or addressed meetings side by side with Horne Tooke and Thelwall. They, together with the leading Reformers, were the butts of the caricaturist Gillray, and of the satirists of the Government party. Yet their tenets never coincided with those of the Reformers, and they never deserved the epithets, lavishly poured on them by irate Tories, of "Jacobins" and "Levellers." Although in their speeches, when carried away by enthusiasm or indignation, they sometimes used the same language as the leaders of the Reform party, in their acts they placed tradition above principle, and showed a nice regard of the policy of slow and gradual improvement. They indeed meant to evolve out of the British Constitution the popular liberties that were implied in it, but with the reserve that these liberties should be dispensed by themselves, controlled

by themselves, and should not supersede the political privilege of the oligarchy. They freely talked "philosophy," but in practice they hardly aimed at any greater change than Burke had advocated when he still was the spokesman of Liberalism in the House of Commons.

Thelwall, on the contrary, considered the Rights of Man as an ideal which ought to stir English politics to immediate and effective realisations. He rejoiced at the Whigs' professions of political faith, but he would have had greater cause for joy if they had moved a step towards democracy. He entertained personal regard for Fox and Sheridan, but he could not look upon them as political friends so long as they placed class-interests before the interests of the people, and delayed the advent of justice on the score of Parliamentary prudence. "Why," said he, "should these great men, with all their intelligence of mind, have stood up in the House of Commons to warn the people against the elementary principles and abstract propositions? . . . Alas! the great talents of Fox, the splendour of mind that characterises Sheridan—in many respects, the upright and generous Sheridan—could never have been so obscured and lost, during a period so favourable for rousing all the vigour of intellect as the present, but for this party-spirit, oppressing and annihilating that energy which an appeal to first principles, and nothing but an appeal to first principles, calls so effectually forth. . . . Moderation! moderation! I detest it. . . ."[1] He did not mean moderation in the relations

[1] *The Tribune*, i., 213, 214.

between men, but moderation of principles, and that timidity in practice which endlessly postponed Reform.

The Whigs were not firm enough in their devotion to right to overcome sluggish prejudices or boldly launch into novelty. Hesitation or compunction too often laid hold of them when they had to take a decisive step. "When the mania of alarm first burst out, when proclamations were posted in every street, when the militia were called out, and Parliament assembled in a hurry, Fox comes down to the House of Commons, reprobates the meditated war, speaks in the most direct and open manner, condemns the alarm, treats it as a juggle and a ministerial trick, and brands the Association[1] with merited infamy. What does he do the next day? Why, he goes with his aristocratic friends to the parish meeting of St. George's, Hanover Square, and puts his name to one of these very associations, the alarming introduction of which he had so recently reprobated. Mark the next step of the Whigs. They condemn the war. Yet, what do they do? Vote supplies for the vigorous prosecution of that war. They affirm that it is a war levelled at the liberties of Europe. Yet, calling themselves the friends of Liberty, they say: 'If you do go to war, we are determined to follow you. . . .'"[2]

In his attitude towards the Whigs, Thelwall was influenced by the diffidence of the wage-earners, who formed the bulk of the Reform party, for men who

[1] John Reeve's Association against Republicans and Levellers.
[2] *The Tribune*, i., 220.

made laudable efforts to secure just and long-desired liberties for the people, but who were of a privileged class and, in a predicament, sided with their class. At a meeting of the Southwark Society, where Thelwall held the chair, a proposal was made by one of the audience to the effect of connecting that Society with the Whig association, the Friends of the People. The motion was repelled on the grounds: "That the Whigs were not in earnest, and merely wished to get into place."[1] Thelwall was inclined to except Fox from this feeling of distrust, for his commanding personality seemed to rise above the common meanness of human nature. But he entertained suspicions of his followers. "The Duke of Bedford," he wrote in his note-book, "has perhaps full title to the praise of a high and generous magnanimity and an hereditary veneration for what he regards as the principles of the original Whigs. But to suppose that even he has not some portion of that superb feeling of the high-souled optimates which is a little out of tune with the rights and the spirit of an age in which intelligence has taken an unprecedented range, would be to doubt the influence of causes in the production of effects."[2]

Bent as they were upon rousing the Whigs out of timidity or self-interest, and upon obtaining an immediate betterment of the condition of the lower classes, the leaders of the Reform party did not wish to imitate the French. Thelwall, who in speech and

[1] "Report of Thelwall's Trial. Evidence of Mr. Taylor (surgeon)," p. 25.

[2] MSS., vol. i.

in writing expounded their position, emphatically stated how far they were from approving all the acts of the French and from designing to follow in their footsteps.

He did indeed acknowledge how much they owed to the French. They borrowed from them their ideal. But they had too steady a sense of the differences that existed between France and their own country not to feel that they could and ought to bring about like results by wholly unlike means. Their eagerness to enjoy the rights and the welfare, for which their class had qualified themselves of late years by intellectual enlightenment and moral improvement, did not preclude respect for the liberties won by their ancestors, and the deeply-seated belief that political progress might be effected within the compass of English law. They — the first defenders of the popular claims in England — already possessed the political wisdom that has ever since, on the whole, characterised English democracy.

Their enthusiasm for the French Revolution was great, inasmuch as they were indebted to its philosophers for the explicit and impassioned expression of rights but dimly implied in the charters of the British Commons, and as they had learnt from its achievements the possibility of immediate far-reaching changes in the form of government and of society. "Era of happiness in the history of the world!" exclaimed Thelwall; "had the nations of Europe known how to improve it as they ought. Dawn of a real golden age—an age of science and peace—when the first nation in the world

for arts, for literature and for refinement, offered to throw away the sword for ever, when her priests were becoming patriots, her soldiers enlightened citizens, and her artisans and poor trampled peasantry were starting into men and philosophers!" ("Life," p. 60.) Thelwall especially admired the victory of principles, which had been the prominent feature of this great drama of history, and valued the increase of vigour which this force of the spirit added to the movement for Reform in England, clogged by excessive regard of precedent. "That which I glory in, in the French Revolution, is this: That it has been upheld and propagated as a principle of that Revolution, that ancient abuses are not by their antiquity converted into virtues; that it has been affirmed and established that man has rights which no statutes or usages can take away; that intellectual beings are entitled to the use of their intellects; that the object of society is the promotion of the general happiness of mankind; that thought ought to be free, and that the propagation of thought is the duty of every individual; that one order of society has no right, how many years soever they have been guilty of the pillage, to plunder and oppress the other parts of the community. . . . These are principles that I admit, and that cause me, notwithstanding all its excesses, to exult in the French Revolution." (*The Tribune*, i., 154-6.)

As we see from the closing sentence of this very profession, Thelwall did not ignore the violence, the bloodshed, the defiance to humanity and to common pity, with which the French Revolution was too unquestionably to be charged. But he knew how

much of the guilt was to be imputed to the frailty of human nature, and how much to the fatal consequences of past abuses outliving their own ruin. "It was the misfortune of France that her philosophers were deficient in the powerful energies of manhood, and her energetic characters in the humanising temperament of philosophy. . . . Still less will it be admissible to attribute the mischiefs that sprang from unfortunate combinations of circumstances to the principles of the Revolution, if it can be proved (and the proof, I think, would not be difficult) that the imbecility of the philosophic and the ferocity of the energetic party had their remote causes alike in the vices and cruelties of the old despotism." ("Sober Reflections," 64, 65.)

He abhorred, as much as any anti-Gallic Tory, the fatality which had carried the French, under pressure of conspiracy at home and of aggression from abroad, first to smother treason in blood, then, as if maddened into bloody frenzy, needlessly to protract legal slaughter and organised rapine. France, he was firmly convinced, ought to stand a perpetual warning as well as a perpetual example to the nations of the world. "Let us see what France has done that was right: and that, when it becomes necessary, let us turn to. Let us see what France has done that was wrong: and that let us always avoid. Let our rulers also (if they shudder, as all nature should shudder, at the excesses which have been perpetrated) consider what were the causes of these excesses. Let them remember that, if the despotism of the Bourbons had never existed, the

tyranny of Robespierre had never stained with crimson horror the pages of history." ("Rights of Nature," Part II., 85.)

He urged Englishmen to resist the infection of unjustified panic, that they might see there was no likeness in the situation of England and in that of France. Political reform could be carried out at home without sudden and ruinous changes, and without the frightful calamities that had desolated the neighbouring country. Owing to the endeavours of their forefathers, the common people of England had not the same causes and did not cherish the same feelings of disaffection as the unhappy middle and lower classes of France. Thelwall joined the two great Whig orators, Sheridan and Erskine,[1] in pointing out the essential difference between England and France in that momentous juncture. "If *their* innovation is so pestilential a nuisance, so much the worse for them: for they must live in the stench. If *our* old edifice is a tumbling nuisance, so much the worse for us: for our houses will be endangered by the fall. But the pillars of our Constitution will not tumble upon *their* heads; nor will their pestilential manufacture poison *our* air." (*Id.*, 29.)

There was no danger, for any fair observer of the agitation for Reform, that the people of England should imitate the excesses or imbibe the destructive spirit of the French Revolutionists. On the other hand, the example of the French monarchy, hurled to ruin by its own reckless obstinacy and con-

[1] *Vide* "Speeches of R. B. Sheridan," vol. ii., pp. 656-7; and Erskine's "Addresses in Defence of Thomas Paine."

temptuous disregard of the interests of the people, might be a reminder for the rulers of England to steer clear of any similar course of action. Political and social peace could be preserved in Britain only by the firm adherence of the privileged classes to the policy of continual progress which had been the glory of the country in past history. "The true sons of moderation and good order endeavour to produce a timely and temperate reform as the only means of averting an ultimate revolution." ("Sober Reflections," 79.)

The Reform ought to bear a double aspect: to be political and social.

The great political improvement upon which all others depended, and from which all others were in time to derive, was universal suffrage. Faithful to the spirit of English history, Thelwall advocated this Reform on the grounds of tradition. "What is the meaning of that maxim so frequently reiterated by Blackstone, Somers and a variety of Constitutional writers, that every British freeman should be governed by laws of his own making? For the distinctions of vassalage are no more, and no one will have the audacity to deny that by *every British freeman* is explicitly to be understood *every native inhabitant of Britain.* What is also the meaning of the following quotation from Blackstone: 'No subject of England can be constrained to pay aids or taxes even for the defence of the realm or the support of Government, but such as are imposed by his own consent or that of his representatives in Parliament . . .'? Is it not an express declaration

that every individual debarred from the right of universal suffrage is in reality a slave?" ("Rights of Britons," 41-2.) The wisdom of the makers of English liberty had thus provided the meanest individual with the safeguards of citizenship—if only the provisions of the Constitution were put into force, and if the securities already gained were not blotted out by the usurpations of privilege or of property. What was needed? To purify the fountains of political administration. "What are these impure and polluted fountains? Parliamentary corruption, the system of Cabinet intrigue, the system of rotten boroughs. It is by these that the people are deprived of their right of electing those who are to make the laws by which they are to be governed; and the consequence of this is that those who make the laws pay no attention to the interests of those who have no influence in appointing them to make them." ("Speech of 26th October, 1795," p. 11.)

While advocating a needful reform, which, in spirit, bore the character of a mere extension of the immemorial rights of Britons, but in act was to be a new venture out of the range of past experience, Thelwall fell into some illusions, which he would probably have corrected had he had a chance of seeing universal suffrage carried into practice. He trusted, as a true devotee of Reason, in the universal prevalence of common-sense and sound judgment, under political and social circumstances which should preclude the brutalising influences of oppression and misery. "Is not the meanest peasant capable of knowing who is an indulgent and kind master to his

dependents and a benefactor to the surrounding neighbourhood? who is careful of his own property, and enjoys it to the credit of his family and the happiness of his fellow-creatures? . . ."[1] Will not that peasant make a better choice of representatives than borough-mongers and bribing ministers?

A sober estimate of the imperfections of universal suffrage can hardly be expected from a rationalist and an idealist, who could not on this point have been instructed by experience. On the other hand, with a deep sense of the practical, Thelwall fully understood the cause which, even in the light of experience and to the minds of the Liberals of to-day, justifies the institution of the popular vote, namely, its being the least inadequate means of defending the interests of the many against the selfishness or the encroachments of the few. "Had every man the weight proportioned to his real importance in the State, were freemen freely represented, had everyone who has an *interest* a *voice* also in the representation, would the most important part of the community be thus neglected and despised?"[2] Thelwall laid down the principle, which a century of progress towards democracy has fully confirmed: "Laws, to be beneficial to all, must be made by the consent and appointment of all."[3]

By attending to the interests of a class, Thelwall was true to the utilitarian spirit of English politics, as, by seeking progress in a revival of the dormant

[1] "The Rights of Britons," p. 43.
[2] *The Peripatetic*, i., p. 145.
[3] *The Tribune*, iii., p. 250.

energies of the Constitution, he was true to the traditional spirit of English history.

We wish now to show that, as he was no mere emulator of the French, and had given a decidedly British turn to the struggle for liberty in Britain, so French philosophy and the aspirations of the French Revolutionists had widened his views, stimulated his efforts, and strengthened his expectations. While supporting his immediate claims by reference to utility and precedent, he was guided in his interpretation of the English Constitution by the light of French speculation, and upborne through his trials by the bright hope of justice and happiness on earth, which from France was beaming upon the world. Under the influence of French thought and of French enthusiasm, he inaugurated a new era of English politics, in which the old British empiricism, though still retaining its force of poise and its pragmatic value, was enlivened and emboldened by a new influx of idealism. Thelwall disseminated among the people the individualistic theories which J. J. Rousseau had expressed with passionate eloquence and powerful logic. He made clear to his popular audiences the distinction between natural rights (of man outside society) and artificial rights (of man in society). He stated how society ought to be subservient to the individual, not the individual to society; how consequently usurpation of rights by some, which tended to privation of rights for others, should be prevented; how the only effective means of securing liberty and equality was universal suffrage.[1]

[1] "The Rights of Nature," Part II., p. 37 *ff.*

The men of his party admired him as much for the broadness and daring thoroughness of his principles as for his practical exertions in behalf of Reform. A group of democrats sent him an address, after his acquittal, the words of which reflected the idealism which they had learnt from their leader. "Impelled by one common sentiment, the duty we owe to you as a Benefactor of Mankind, we hasten to address you. . . . We admire your advocacy of the great Cause wherein you are so indefatigably employed: the Destruction of Tyranny, and the promotion of the Happiness of Man. . . . For, while we trace the Progress of Reason and of those principles which must ultimately bring Happiness to Man, we cannot but observe the sources from whence they flow, and acknowledge in you a living Fountain of Truth and Goodness. . . . We disdain to flatter: the dignity of Man is far above so mean and contemptible a practice."[1]

Thelwall trusted in the appeal of the ideal to the heart, as in its hold on the intellect. We have shown how, in the hope of rousing even in the favoured of fortune a thrill of human love, he described in verse and in prose the beauty of the new religion which was to change the face of the earth: the religion of humanity. "I have endeavoured," he said, "with what little persuasion I could muster, to fix the hearts and affection of men upon a great principle: the principle of philanthropy, the principle of universal good, the source and fountain of all just government, of equal rights, equal

[1] MSS., vol. ii.

laws, reciprocal respect and reciprocal protection."[1] As a Reformer and a leader of the people, not content to plead *for* the unhappy, he pleaded *to* them, in the name of their own sufferings. "The liberty you seek is the emancipation of the human race. . . . It is the substance, not the word, that you are to pursue: and that substance is the happiness, welfare and prosperity of mankind: the universal diffusion of equal rights and equal laws, which smooth the rugged asperities of unequal conditions, and make man, wherever he beholds the form of man, perceive a brother and a friend."[2]

Thelwall himself, in the heat of the struggle for Parliamentary Reform, contemned and assaulted, sought refuge in the vision of the blissful future, of "that paradise of felicity into which the improvement of the human intellect may convert the globe."[3] He satisfied himself that "glory then shall alone be placed in intellect and virtue, and the only strife between man and man be, who shall best deserve the love and admiration of his fellow-creatures, who shall be, not the greatest destroyer, but the greatest benefactor of the world."[4] From such thoughts did he derive strength to proceed, in buoyancy of spirit, through Government persecution and private abuse, towards the distant goal of justice and liberty.

Thelwall's generous idealism and active enthusiasm made him a *social* Reformer. In this capacity — though baulked from any immediate

[1] "Sober Reflections," p. 103.
[2] "Speech of 26th October, 1795."
[3] *Id.* [4] *Id.*

achievement by the reactionary and anti-Gallic frenzy—he contributed to give to English legislation the direction in which it has ever since decidedly progressed; he was instrumental in setting up the philosophic notion of individual worth, propagated by the French, by the side of the traditional British regard of nobility, rank and property; he breathed into England's public life the spirit which was to become one of the most powerful forces of civilisation: the spirit of human fellowship.

He claimed the pre-eminence of intrinsic merit above the usurped superiority of title and fortune. "The patriot esteems the distinctions of Nature higher than those of fortune, and (paying his obedience only to the laws) proportions his respect to the virtues and abilities of men."[1] He battered down the deep-rooted prejudice that set the horny-handed labourer lower in general estimation than the well-to-do idler. "Respect is not attached to property or condition. It belongs to nothing but virtue, and to that which is a branch of virtue—well applied talents."[2] The toiler of the field or of the factory was, indeed, twice worthy of regard, for his dignity as a man and for his social value. "He is the most respectable sort of being, chiefly, it should seem, on account of that very usefulness without the assistance of which great lords, ministers and wealthy proprietors would be less than nothing."[3]

Working-men were not the intemperate brutes

[1] *The Peripatetic*, i., p. 86.
[2] "The Rights of Nature," Part I., p. 40.
[3] "Speech of 26th October, 1795," p. 9.

that the upper classes would fain represent them to be. Thelwall exclaimed ironically: "The temperate guardians of our laws never reel to the Treasury Bench flushed with the *vulgar* luxuries of claret and champagne, and they are undoubtedly justifiable in dooming to nakedness and starvation the plebeian wretches who intoxicate now and then with the *costly* essence of malt and juniper."[1] They were not brutish, but embruted. Had those who charged them with degrading passions done all in their power to secure them that bodily comfort and intellectual enlightenment which could alone permit them the practice of self-respect? "Perhaps," Thelwall went on in the same sarcastic tone, "by sobriety they mean abstinence; and by industry, working fourteen hours a day, as every labourer who has a family which he wishes decently to provide for is frequently obliged to do, to the rapid injury of the animal frame and the total negation of any social enjoyment."[2] Let the oppressed be restored to their own selves: such was the first behest of Thelwall as social Reformer, in the name of the ineffaceable dignity of human nature.

His next injunction was: Let the destitute be given the means of improving their physical and intellectual being to the height of its capabilities. Knowledge, it was objected, being the fruit of leisure, could only be the privilege of a class enjoying leisure. Thelwall answered: "Let then all be granted enough leisure to cultivate their higher faculties. I indeed affirm

[1] *The Peripatetic*, iii., p. 127. [2] *Id.*

that *every* man, woman or child ought to obtain something more in the general distribution of the fruits of labour than food and rags, and a wretched hammock with a poor rug to cover it; and that, without working twelve and fourteen hours a day, six days out of seven, from six to sixty. They have a claim, a sacred, inviolable claim, growing out of the fundamental maxim upon which alone all property can be supported, to some comfort and enjoyment, in addition to the necessaries of life; and to some tolerable leisure for such discussions, and some means for such information, as may lead to an understanding of their rights, without which they can never understand their duties."[1]

The corollary of these principles, the natural consequence of this active sympathy for the lowly, was the drafting of a scheme for a redistribution of wealth. Thelwall declared it one of the most imperious biddings of social justice that a fairer share of property should be allotted to every member of the community. This claim was to the highest degree revolutionary; but true to his own peaceful inclinations and to his British respect of precedent and gradual improvement, Thelwall qualified the audacity of his theoretical contention by providing all guarantees for the present occupants and all necessary transitions towards the future economy of property.

Again and again he professed his detestation of the so-called "no-property doctrine," which John Reeves and his associators had dragged to light from treatises

[1] "The Rights of Nature," Part I., p. 16.

of philosophers reasoning in the abstract,[1] and had unfairly used as a means of raising a panic, and thus of more surely ruining the Reform movement. "Equality of property," he declared, "is totally impossible in the present state of the human intellect and industry; and if one of you once could be reduced to attempt a system so wild and so extravagant, you could only give to rascals and cut-throats an opportunity, by general pillage and assassination, of transferring all property into their own hands and establishing a tyranny more intolerable than anything of which you now complain."[2] But he was no less emphatic in his protest against the undue regard that was paid to property. He stood up as the self-appointed defender of intellect and labour *versus* corrupt aristocracy and purse-proud middle class. He assumed as the watchword of his party a sentence of Burke's, written in scorn, which he proclaimed with pride: "Jacobinism is the revolt of talents against property."[3] He wrote, with as much firmness as moderation: "Woe to that country in which too much veneration is entertained for property. Not that I would have it violated. I would have the most insurmountable barriers placed round it. But no respect for opulence! It is one thing to place a barrier round property; another to put property in the scale against the welfare and independence of the people."[4]

[1] For instance, Godwin's "Political Justice."
[2] "Speech of 26th October, 1795," p. 14.
[3] Written by Burke in "A Letter on a Regicide Peace."
[4] *The Tribune*, iii., p. 256.

His practical views as a Reformer agreed with his theoretical tenets as an idealistic and moral philosopher. His plan of Reform mostly tended to restore the "reign of virtue," by bringing the world back to the simplicity of ancient times. He looked upon material progress as a fallacy, so long as all should not be benefited by the increase of wealth which accrued to the propertied classes. He proclaimed the growth of industry and commerce a calamity, so long as regulations should not secure to the working class part of the profits.

He wished, as a first step, and one which would encroach on no man's present possessions, to have the law limit "land monopoly" and "accumulation of capital." It had become a common occurrence, since the migration townwards had begun, that a landlord should buy up the small freeholds around his estate and become the master, or one of the few masters, of a whole county; or that a farmer, "like a true agricultural cannibal, devoured eight or ten small farms," and assumed the position of a potentate holding the field-labourers of the district at his discretion. This ought to be stopped. What might be said in favour of the accumulation of industrial capital? That "it was necessary for increased production, for the introduction of machinery, for the furthering of inventions, experiments, etc.?" But "production was a mockery, if it was not accompanied with just distribution. The waste of luxury more than kept pace with increase of production. On the other hand, a small quantity of

labour would be sufficient to supply necessaries and comforts, if property was well distributed." [1]

Thelwall does not seem to have settled with himself the point of doctrine which social philosophers are still agitating to-day: what ought to be the form of property most agreeable to justice and most productive of happiness. Now, looking backward to the Golden Age, he inclined towards an ideal of rural felicity, attained by an equal possession of land by all and a moderate share of labour for all, attended by the contentment of frugality and the pure joy of virtue. This ideal he cherished, when, letting his imagination loose, he saw visions of a philosophical millennium, or when, yielding to the poetical mood, he harmonised in verse the world of man with the world of Nature. Now, he had a closer apprehension of the complexity of the modern social problem, and considered by what means humanity and justice could be made to prevail over and above the grim and gloomy conditions of industrial toil. His ardent individualism, his broad sympathy for human suffering, gave him a foresight into the positive improvements of the factory system, which might gradually raise the workers above misery, physical disability and moral decline, namely, sanitary laws, shorter hours, a living wage. He did even more. Looking forward with the mind's eye beyond the stage of social legislation, he outlined the principle of profit-sharing. "The labourer," he stated, "has a right to a share of the produce, not merely equal to his support, but proportionate to the profits of the employer. . . . The labourer has a right (as his

[1] MSS., vol. iii.

share of the benefit) to maintain himself and a family in decency and plenty, and to give his children such an education as, according to the state of society, may be requisite to enable them, if they should have the virtue and the talent, to improve their condition and mount to their intellectual level, though it should be from the lowest to the very highest station of society."[1]

This, for Thelwall, was no sentimental reverie or poetical dream, as the hope of rural happiness he sometimes indulged in. Here, he felt himself on the firm ground of realities, and carried his speculations so far as to delineate in what manner the labouring class would be enabled to work their own emancipation. "The hideous accumulation of capital in a few hands, like all diseases not absolutely mortal, carries in its own enormity the seeds of cure. Man is by his very nature social and communicative, proud to display the little knowledge he possesses, and eager, as opportunity presents, to increase his store. Whatever presses men together, therefore, though it may generate some vices, is favourable to the diffusion of knowledge, and ultimately promotive of human liberty. Hence, every large workshop and manufactory is a sort of political society which no Act of Parliament can silence and no magistrate disperse."[2]

Thus Thelwall foresaw, in spite of anti-combination laws, the approach of the era of trade-unionism and

[1] "The Rights of Nature," Part II., Letter III.
[2] *Id.*, Part I., p. 19.

of labour-federations, which was to witness the acquisition by labourers of all that makes life more livable, and the ever increasing material and moral improvement of the poorer and larger portion of humanity.

CONCLUSION

THE political and economic principles advocated by Thelwall, which were soon to become the guiding lights of democratic and social progress, had not yet taken sufficient hold of the many to rouse in them the sense of their wrongs, or to outbalance the impulse of traditional unreasoned feelings. The few educated dissenters, craftsmen or shopkeepers, who composed the Reform party, were powerless against the forces of race-hatred, religious prejudice, political prepossessions and patriotic passion, which then controlled the majority of Englishmen of all conditions. The voice of Thelwall was lost in the loud uproar of the loyal party; the seed of his generous principles fell on barren soil, where it was foredoomed to lie unfruitful for a long lapse of years. He was compelled after a short time, by dire necessity, to withdraw from the struggle.

When, after the termination of the Napoleonic wars, the storm of reactionary passion abated, and the agitation for Reform could be resumed, Thelwall, bowed down by misfortune, harrowed by scorn and abuse, jaded by the daily drudgery of bread-winning (made the harder for him by the egregiousness of his past), had no spirit to step forward to the front. Nor was he endowed with enough keenness of apprehension or suppleness of intellect to adapt

himself to the altered conditions of the contest. In 1818, however, he tried to start a political newspaper, which he called *The Champion*, rather, it seems, with a view to making money than with any firm conviction or definite purpose. In it, he did hardly anything but republish the articles which he had contributed to the *Morning Chronicle* at the time of the High Treason Trials, or work out the notes collected in the days of his former political activity.

His social doctrine, which had been the first attempt to allay the harshness of industrial slavery, was already out of touch with the newer, more precise claims of factory-workers; and his flowery rhetoric was out of tune with the more direct speech of the younger popular debaters. He was compelled to desist from his journalistic venture after having well-nigh run into bankruptcy. He resumed his profession of an elocutionist, which he had taken up after his political troubles and his failure as a farming man-of-letters, and in which he continued till his death, in 1834.

It remains for us, after having portrayed Thelwall's short but eventful career as a leader of the people, to form a general estimate of his character, of his power of mind, and of the remote influence of his doctrine.

He was not one of those highly gifted men who stand prominently at the head of their age, imprinting on the minds of their contemporaries a new intellectual and emotional stamp, promoting unprecedented departures in some line of thought, doing deeds that remain an ever-living force. He numbers with the men of talent, second in rank, whose useful

though inglorious exertions, effective though unrecorded influence, prepare the coming of great thinkers or of great men of action. As a defender, in speech and in writing, of the dispossessed, as a daring and spirited exponent of the principles of the French Revolution, he did much, at a time of retrogression in English politics, towards preparing the democratic and social advance of the thirties and of the latter end of the nineteenth century.

He deeply impressed the better elements of the lower classes, not only by his broad idealism and warm enthusiasm, but by his honesty, his sincerity, his single-minded devotedness.[1] His sympathy for the suffering classes, which fed his dashing

[1] Of the nobleness of Thelwall's character we can quote two concordant testimonies, from a fellow-democrat (whose enthusiasm was just abating), and from a Whig (who flatly disapproved of Thelwall's proselytism). Coleridge expressed to Cottle, in 1797, this opinion, as favourable to Thelwall as it was hard upon the Reform party: "He is intrepid, eloquent and honest—perhaps the only democrat that is honest." (Letter published in "Thomas Poole and His Friends, by Mrs. H. Stanford," i., p. 234.) W. Belsham, after passing some hard strictures on Thelwall's political work, in his "Memoir of George III.," willingly agreed, at the instance of his publisher, Phillips, to qualify his censure in later editions by expressing his respect for the democrat's high respectability. ". . . Of his moral character I then knew nothing, but I have since learned from the most respectable quarters that it is not only unexceptionable, but highly meritorious; and his literary productions prove him to be such in point of intellectual endowments as to place him far above the need of praise. . . . In the edition now preparing for the Press, I shall be happy to declare in the most explicit terms the respect and esteem I entertain for him." (Letter of Belsham to Phillips, 25th November, 1806, preserved among MSS., vol. iii.)

eloquence and inspired him with generous schemes for the redress of grievances, won him the love of the oppressed. His defiance of tyrannous power and his resistance to arbitrary measures gained him their admiration. "If the day of darkness and tempest should come," wrote Coleridge in 1797, "it is most probable that the influence of Thelwall would be great on the lower classes."[1]

His errors were those of his time. He entertained over-sanguine expectations of, and a rather naïve belief in, logical propositions and mechanical devices of government. The men, who for the first time embattled reason against prejudice, and opposed philanthropy to class selfishness, were apt to undervalue the forces of the past, to disdain established opinions and inured habits, to overlook the law of the balance of interests, to ignore the importance of permanence and stability, in the being of societies. Thelwall, as we have shown, in reverence for the British institutions of liberty and in obedience to the British political temper, steered clear of any temptation to imitate the French Revolution. Yet the resistance of the majority to Reform, the denial of justice, the set policy of tyranny and persecution, drove him to exaggerate the uncompromisingness of his principles and the boldness of his contentions. Is it not a law of the political and social development of nations, that an oscillation between two extreme points of Liberalism and Conservatism must needs take place before a

[1] A letter from Coleridge to Mr. John Chubb, of Bridgewater (printed by Mr. J. L. le B. Hammond, in "C. J. Fox, a Political Study," p. 121, note).

tolerable and temporary equipoise is reached? Thelwall's *theories* were bolder than the moral and economic state of England then admitted of. On the other hand, the panic bred by the form which political and social changes were at that time taking in France blinded the majority of the people to the real moderation of his *practice*.

At the very time when Thelwall's short-lived mission was brought to an untimely close by the final victory of the spirit of reaction, Coleridge, in his retreat of Stowey, was beginning to probe the deficiencies of the philosophical and political doctrine which he had thus far held, in common with the popular leader. He had not yet formed a clear notion of the message which he was to teach the nineteenth century in spasmodic, oracular utterances, but he had already satisfied himself of the insufficiency of the creed of the eighteenth century. He then came to look upon Thelwall as the embodiment of the intellectual shortcomings from which he was endeavouring to redeem himself, viz., an excessive fondness for simplicity, an undue reliance on the ratiocinative faculty, a credulous regard of logical regularity. "It may prove of no mean utility to the cause of Truth and Humanity," he wrote to Mr. Chubb, "that Thelwall should spend some years in our society (at Stowey), when his natural impetuosity would be disciplined into patience and salutary scepticism, and the slow energies of a *calculating* spirit."[1]

[1] Above quoted letter to Mr. Chubb. In later years, Coleridge used to tell an anecdote referring to the short visit paid by Thelwall to Nether Stowey in July, 1797. It vividly illustrates

As time went on, Coleridge stood further and further removed from his youthful belief in a rational, sudden regeneration of the world, and he more and more sought truth midway between reason and instinct, idealism and fact, innovation and stability. Yet, while building up his illuminating doctrine of liberal conservatism, he did not forget the great lesson of love and justice which Thelwall had taught him in former years. One is struck, when reading some passages of "The Friend" and of "The Lay Sermons,"[1] by the likeness of Coleridge's conception of social duty and protest against the barbarity of the factory system to Thelwall's principles and schemes of Reform.

Wordsworth, too, remembered, when writing Books VIII. and IX. of "The Excursion," the impassioned sympathy and the generous plans for the betterment

how differently the two friends had come to understand the word *Nature*—Thelwall entertaining the ingenuous eighteenth century belief in the goodness of Nature; Coleridge having already learned that any good is achieved by painful individual effort, and often through the accumulated exertions of many generations. "Thelwall thought it very unfair," said Coleridge to his disciples at Highgate, to "influence a child's mind by inculcating any opinions before it should have come to years of discretion and be able to choose for itself. I showed him my garden, and told him it was my botanical garden. 'How so?' said he, 'it is covered with weeds.' 'Oh,' I replied, 'that is only because it has not yet come to its age of discretion and choice. The weeds, you see, have taken the liberty to grow, and I thought it unfair in me to prejudice the soil towards roses and strawberries.'" (*Table Talk*, 26th July, 1830.)

[1] See our "French Revolution and English Poets," Book III., chap. i., 7, and chap. ii., 6.

of the labourer's condition, which he had heard Thelwall express at Stowey in the summer of 1797.

Is it not likely that Thelwall, who inspired some of the social views of two great thinkers of the nineteenth century, even after they had recanted his political tenets, may have exerted a lasting influence upon the educated artisans and skilled workmen to whom he addressed his speeches, for whom he wrote his books, to whose feelings he forcefully appealed, whose interests he courageously defended? Is it not likely that, beyond the eclipse of Liberalism, his teaching may have reached the democrats of the thirties and the Chartists of the forties?[1] Though he himself had sunk exhausted under the strain of the first struggle, may not the generous feelings and the exalted ideal which he had imbibed from the French Revolution, and unremittingly spread by

[1] We have not been able to trace any definite connection between Thelwall and any prominent actor in the democratic and social movement in the thirties. But, on the other hand, we have found, in his "MS. Journal," a large number of names of artisans, shopkeepers, dissenting ministers, schoolmasters, by whom he was entertained during his tour through the provinces, in whose company he treated philosophical and political topics, and who subscribed for his books. These men, members of Reform Societies, conscious and intelligent defenders of the rights of the people, outlived the period of political reaction, and may have become the instructors of a second generation of democrats and reformers. One Owen, whom Thelwall met at Stockport in 1797, and with whom he discussed "agrarian laws, the expediency of property in land, the impossibility of equalising property, the necessity for the law to discountenance accumulation," etc. ("Journal of Pedestrian Excursion through Wales"), may have been Robert Owen, later of Lanark.

direct address or through his books, have survived as one of the many causes that, thirty years later, furthered the renewed advance of democracy and social reform.

However inadequate some of Thelwall's practical schemes may have seemed to the continuators of his work, the spirit in which he fought for right and justice was destined to fan and fuel the growing aspirations of the people, being an early manifestation of a new moral force which has lately achieved, and will keep on achieving, wonderful changes in the world of feeling, of thought, and of fact. He gave weight and efficacy to the admirable notions of respect for man, and of devotion to mankind, by transforming these notions into actual and immediate motives of action. To the conduct of men like him, to the teaching of men like him, did moral and social reformers of latter years in great part owe the understanding of the ties that unite all human beings and cause one act of justice to reverberate through illimitable time. They could not but feel inspirited by such a dictum as this—among many like sayings of Thelwall's: "If we consider that man lives not for himself alone, but that every existing being, each individual that participates the feelings and sensations of which he himself is conscious, all that have the same common faculties with himself, are entitled to the same enjoyments and the same rights; that year after year, generation after generation, ages after ages, and myriads of ages after myriads may pass away and still society exist to reap the benefit of our exertions—then

our energy becomes, as it were, immortal, and the desire, the hope, the anxiety to labour for human happiness can only terminate with existence." (*The Tribune*, i., 225-6.)

Thelwall's political career may serve, we think, to make clear in what manner the French Revolution, as emphasising the thought and feelings of the eighteenth century, influenced the growth of the humanitarian and social aspirations which, towards the middle of the nineteenth century, assumed a seemingly sudden importance in the national life of England, spread through literature and invaded the political field, found expression in works of fancy and in books of history, in philosophic treatises and in Parliamentary speeches, encouraged the lower class to the vindication of reforms, awakened the propertied class to "social compunction," and became the life-spirit of such antagonistic doctrines as Chartism and Social Toryism. The temporary triumph in England, during the first half of the nineteenth century, of the "individualistic" doctrine —derived, by one-sided reasoning, from eighteenth century rationalism—which, under pretence of giving free play to men's individual energies, delivered the weak into the hands of the strong, and favoured the selfish, gain-seeking, unpitiable propensity of the manufacturing and trading middle class, closed, for a time, men's eyes to the fact, that there breathed a generous spirit of humanity through the rationalism which gave birth to the French Revolution. Those who ascribe the guilt of the "laissez-faire" iron rule to the philosophical inheritance of 1789 fall into the

capital error of arbitrarily dissociating the philosophy from the feelings of the French Revolution.

Rationalistic principles, as they were understood and carried out by the French Revolutionists, were inseparable from ardent cravings for general happiness; the ideal of liberty included the ideal of fraternity; the notion of political equality naturally broadened into that of social justice. The French Revolution was the product of emotional as well as of historical and philosophical forces. The passion from which it drew its strength outlasted it and remained the informing principle of the collective life of European nations. To England, we think, it imparted the *social* impetus, which, co-operating with the traditional inborn striving towards political liberty, brought about the transformation, of which we are witnessing an advanced stage to-day.

Thelwall, who deeply drank of the enthusiasm of the French Revolution, and, under its genial influence, caught a glimpse of future truth, was, we will venture to say, a connecting link between the French Revolution, considered as one of the most powerful spiritual forces of the world, and the political and social progress of contemporary England.

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APPENDIX

THREE UNPUBLISHED LETTERS OF WILLIAM GODWIN, FROM AUTOGRAPHS IN THE POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR

A LETTER from Godwin to Thelwall, during the latter's confinement in the Tower, 18th September, 1794:—

I

"I saw for the first time yesterday your letter to Mr. Holcroft, in which my name is mentioned.

"I hope you will not feel much pain in the decision my judgment has led me to form respecting my proposed visit to you. I believe there is not an atom of pusillanimity or indifference in it. But the more critical the situation of public affairs appears to become, the more it strikes me as a duty to do nothing precipitately. The line of conduct I have chalked out to myself is as follows; it remains to be seen whether I shall have the virtue to act up to it: Upon all occasions to carry my life in my hand; not to indulge a particle of selfish retrospect to life or its pleasures, or the fear of pain and death; but to expend this treasure, which does not belong to me, but to the public, with all the wisdom I am able; therefore, to risk it freely in matters of solid and palpable benefit, but not in matters of mere gratification.

"Now, I believe the visit I proposed is rather a matter of gratification to me, and perhaps not less to you, than of indispensable utility. I cannot therefore reconcile myself for the sake of it to submit to the terms proposed. These persons fixed on a day and hour when I was to attend them if I pleased. Now I cannot lie: I abhor duplicity and suppression of every sort; and I have no inclination unnecessarily to expose myself

to the caprice of persons who by Act of Parliament have abolished all law and seized a despotical power into their hands. What business have I, then, with the sittings of these conspirators?

"Having taken up the pen, I have one or two other things to add. I am sorry to see in your letters a spirit of resentment and asperity against your persecutors. I was in hopes that the solitude of a prison might have taught you to reflect on this error and amend it. How senseless and idiot-like it is to be angry with what we know to be a mere passive instrument, moved according to certain regular principles, and in no degree responsible for its operations! If you had ever fully conceived the beauty of universal benevolence, you could not thus neglect and offend against it. If you had understood the Divine principle of loving our enemies, you would be one of its most zealous adherents. If you could feel the difference of sensation produced in every spectator by a man who yields to his unbridled anger and a man whose equanimity no injustice can disturb, who breathes nothing but benignity, who interests himself for the good of all, and who would willingly protect his adversaries from harm and study their advantage, you would be smitten with the generous ardour of earning this sort of sympathy and approbation. All men inevitably shrink in a greater or less degree from him who is ready disciplined and prepared to take pleasure in the sufferings of another.

"One thing more. I understand that you are endeavouring to accumulate material from Sidney and others. I am afraid you are on a wrong scent. Amass as much knowledge as you please, but no authorities. To quote authorities is a vulgar business; every soulless hypocrite can do that. To quote authorities is a cold business; it excites no responsive sentiments and produces no heart-felt conviction. The friend of established usurpation (as honest John Wycliffe said) will always beat us at that. Appeal to that eternal law which the heart of every man of common-sense recognises immediately. Make your justification as palpable to the unlearned as the studious. Strip it of all superfluous appendages; banish from it all useless complexity. Be neither precipitate nor declamatory; but grave and impressive. Consult yourself severely upon the weight of all your allegations. In that case, I have

not a doubt of the event. It is good to be tried in England, where men are accustomed to some ideas of equity, and law is not entirely what the breath of judges and prosecutors shall make it. And better, at least in such a country, is a plain and unsophisticated argument, making its way irresistibly to the understanding,

'Than a successive title, long and dark,
Drawn from the musty rolls of Noah's Ark.'

"WILLIAM GODWIN."

II.

After the publication of the anonymous pamphlet, "Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr. Pitt's Bills, by a Lover of Order," Thelwall, having requested Godwin to acknowledge its authorship, received the following answer:—

"Your letter is much too extraordinary and much too angry for me to attempt to answer it properly by the bearer. Indeed, it would not be without great reluctance that I should engage in the tediousness of an epistolary correspondence on the subject, though I should most willingly engage in a personal explanation.

"I am most assuredly the author of the pamphlet you mention, and I am fully persuaded that it contains the sentiments of an honest man. There is not one word in it respecting you that I have not pressed upon your personal attention again and again with earnest anxiety. My favourable sentiments of you are not in the smallest degree altered, though I confess the undistinguishing fury of the letter before me is more than I can reconcile with these sentiments.

"I do not conceive that my frankness in acknowledging the pamphlet entitles you to the public use of my name. I would not advise anyone who has a respect for morality to enter upon a public discussion in the angry temper in which your letter is written. But you will, of course, do as you think fit, and contribute perhaps, as far as your power may extend, to consign me also to the lamp-post.

"W. GODWIN.

"*28th November, 1795.*"

III

To an animated letter of Thelwall, Godwin replied:

"It is impossible for me to answer the farrago of abusive language you send me.

"If ever you should return to the esteem you once professed for me, you will be at all times welcome to my intercourse and explanation.

"There is not a word, in the pamphlet, reflecting upon your motives or your insincerity.

"There has been, and will be, before passing the Bills, time enough for you to answer my pamphlet, if you thought proper, three times over.

"There is but one part of your letter that I suspect of insincerity, where you affect seriously to charge me with timidity.

"W. GODWIN.

"*29th November, 1795.*"

(The final—and composed—rejoinder of Godwin, published by Thelwall in vol. iii. of *The Tribune*, we have partly quoted, *sup.* Chap. II., p. 139.)

THE END

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